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THE DEAD SHOT DANDY; or, BENITO, THE BOY BUGLER.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "CRIMSON KATE," "GRIT, THE BRAVO SPORT," "BISON BILL," "GOLD PLUME," "LITTLE GRIT," ETC., ETC.



WITH A REVOLVER IN EACH HAND DEAD SHOT DANDY BEGAN TO FIRE INTO THE HEAD OF THE HERD SWEEPING OVER THEM.

The Dead Shot Dandy; OR, BENITO, THE BOY BUGLER.

A Romance of a Boy Waif on the
Texas Prairies.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "LITTLE GRIT, THE WILD RIDER,"
"GOLD PLUME, THE BOY BANDIT,"
"MERLE, THE MIDDY,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEAD SHOT DANDY.

"HELLO, Dead Shot, is yer goin' on a scout, that I sees yer cleanin' up yer weepins?"
"Yes, Bronze Bill, I am going on a short scout."

"Which way, this time, pard?"

"I'll strike the Red Trail through the chaparrals and then return down the river back to the fort."

"When does yer start?"

"In an hour or so."

"That will bring you to the Padre's Rock to camp?"

"Yes, I always camp there at night, for there is good grass and water."

"Waal, luck to yer, says I, Dead Shot."

"Thank you, Bronze Bill."

The scene of this conversation was in a Texan fort, not far from the Rio Grande.

The speakers were a scout and a hunter of the fort, the former being the one addressed as Dead Shot, and a man of imposing appearance.

His form was elegant, yet powerfully built, straight as an arrow, willowy, and graceful, and his face was stamped with nobility of soul, and fascinating in its manly beauty.

His dark-blue eyes, shaded by long black lashes, and his gold-brown hair, hanging below his broad shoulders, gave him a look of womanly gentleness, though a slumbering fire seemed dwelling far back in the depths of his eyes, ready, volcano-like, to burst forth when his nature was aroused.

The dress of the man had gained for him the nickname of Dead Shot Dandy, though he was entered upon the roll as Duke Decatur, and his name was all that was known regarding him by officers and men, other than that he was the best scout upon the Rio Grande border.

Rumor had it that he had once been a wealthy ranchero in Mexico, though an American, but that he had lost his riches by gambling, and, thoroughly acquainted with the country, had taken to scouting; but none seemed to know who he was or what he had been, and of his past he said nothing, and there was that about him which forbade questioning into his antecedents.

He spoke Spanish as well as he did English, and his dress was a mingling of the Mexican Army and border garb, and scrupulously neat, for he wore cavalry boots, into the tops of which were stuck buckskin leggings, fringed and beaded.

His shirt was of gray silk, the collar turned over a black scarf, and about his slender waist was a silver-thread sash, in which were a pair of gold-mounted revolvers and a jewel-hilted bowie.

His jacket was velvet, thoroughly Mexican, trimmed with gold-lace and buttons, and his sombrero was of the style worn beyond the Rio Grande, and with an ingeniously-made gold-snake, with diamond eyes, serving as a cord.

In his black-silk scarf glimmered a diamond *solitaire* of considerable value, and upon the little finger was a heavy band of gold in which was set an exquisite ruby.

By his side lay a richly-mounted Mexican saddle and bridle, and staked out in front of his tent was a black horse, whose beauty, speed and endurance had caused him to be coveted by all at the fort, in spite of the Commandment not to covet our neighbor's goods.

The one who had been passing by Dead Shot Dandy's tent and had spoken to him was a buckskin-clad hunter of the post, and remarkable only in the fact that he kept the soldiers well supplied with game.

He had come to the fort soon after the arrival of Dead Shot Dandy, and, as to what he had been, no one knew and few cared; but between

the two no friendship had existed, for Bronze Bill, as he was called, had hinted that he thought that the scout would bear watching, while the latter had plainly said he would some day prove the hunter to be a villain.

Leaving Dead Shot Dandy putting his arms in readiness for his scouting-trip, Bronze Bill passed on to a distant part of the post, where were located the hunters, trappers and hangers-on of the fort.

Entering an *adobe* hut, he found several men seated at a table gambling, and giving one a look of a peculiar kind, he walked out again, and took his seat upon a fallen tree.

The one to whom he had given the sign soon came out of the hut and joined him.

He was as darkly bronzed as a Mexican, with fiery black eyes and hair and mustache of the same hue, the former dropping upon his shoulders.

He was dressed in a handsome suit of buckskin, was thoroughly armed, and certainly would be considered a remarkably handsome man, while his form was tall, slender, yet sinewy and agile.

Next to Dead Shot Dandy he was the ranking scout at the fort, and a good one too; but he had a violent temper and a manner that was haughty and overbearing, and few liked him, and he was generally dreaded.

His own story of himself was that his father had been an American naval officer, who had married his mother, a Mexican heiress, and settled in Mexico.

He had been born in Mexico, reared in luxury, and well educated; but his father was suspected of plotting against the Government, and had been executed, his mother stripped of her wealth and exiled.

Coming to Texas, his mother and himself had settled upon a small ranch, where she died soon after, and he took to scouting as a means of support.

He called himself Jose Nunez, but as usual on the border, he had been given a nickname, that of Monte, on account of his great love for gambling.

"Pard, Dead Shot starts on a scout this arternoon," said Bronze Bill, as Monte joined him.

"Ah! and you know his course?" was the quick response.

"I does."

"And you are ready to earn the gold I promised you?"

"Yas, pard."

"Then do so, and start at once, for I wish no one to see us together."

"I'm off, and I'll win my gold, pard Monte," answered Bronze Bill, and five minutes after he was mounted upon his horse, riding away from the fort in a southerly direction.

But once the roll of the prairie hid him from view of any eyes that might be watching him, he turned to the northward, and pressing his horse into a rapid gallop, said:

"Now fer ther Padre's Rock to win ther gold thet Monte promised me."

CHAPTER II.

A TRAGEDY AT PADRE'S ROCK.

BRONZE BILL did not certainly spare his horse in his ride to Padre's Rock, but kept him at a long, sweeping gallop, which, however, did not seem to distress the animal to any great extent.

It was not yet sunset when he drew rein in the midst of the chaparrals, and staked his horse out in an open plot, while he strode on at a quick pace, as though he had not yet reached his destination.

Soon he came in sight of an opening in the chaparrals of considerable size, and in the center of it was a clump of trees half-hiding a large rock, which, in the distance, looked like an *adobe* hut.

By this the chaparral trail ran, and, as there was a spring bubbling up from the base of the rock, and plenty of grass in the opening, it was a favorite camping-place among scouts and hunters.

Straight to the rock Bronze Bill went, and climbing half-way up its rough side, concealed himself in the foliage of a scrub-tree that grew there, his face turned up the trail coming from the south.

Hardly had he gotten settled in his ambush before a horseman appeared in sight coming slowly toward the Padre's Rock, which had been so named from its having been the scene where a Mexican priest had been murdered some years before.

"Yes, it are Dead Shot Dandy, and I didn't ride none too rapid ter git here fust," muttered Bronze Bill, as he brought his weapons round for use.

"I guesses he'll come close up, so I kin use my revolver on him, an' ef thet do fail, then I hes my rifle."

"Waal, it hain't adzactly squar' ter shoot a man out o' ambush, but I gits paid fer it, an' thet gold chain an' watch he wears, not ter speak o' ther pin an' ring, an' leavin' out his money, with which he allus goes, are enough ter smooth over my conscience, which hain't so durned tender nobow."

Nearer and nearer the horseman came, all unconscious of danger, and yet seemingly on the alert from habit.

Straight toward the rock he rode, halting when within thirty paces of it, and cautiously peering into its ragged sides, and the scrub-trees about it.

As still and quiet as a chaparral tiger waiting for its prey, Bronze Bill remained, his rifle lying cocked by his side, his revolver held ready in his hand, while he peered out through the foliage that concealed him so well.

As if satisfied that no foe lurked about the rock the horseman rode on, the last rays of the setting sun falling full upon him, as he drew rein to dismount.

Suddenly there came a flash and report, and the horseman reeled in his saddle, as though hard hit; but, while his horse wheeled suddenly about, in fright, his rider drew his revolver and fired directly into the foliage of the tree, just as a second discharge came.

But the second shot from the ambush flew wild, and was mingled with a cry of pain, as down from his perch rolled the assassin, falling at the very feet of his intended victim's horse.

Limp and motionless in a ghastly heap Bronze Bill lay, while, seated upon his horse, seemingly unhurt, the rider gazed down at him for an instant with a contemptuous look upon his handsome face.

"Oh, you coward!" came in deep tones from the lips of the horseman, who, without another glance at his prostrate foe's upturned face, rode slowly on by the Padre's Rock, and disappeared up the trail in the chaparrals.

Hardly had he ridden out of sight when a deep groan broke from the lips of Bronze Bill, whose eyes now opened and looked in a scared way about him.

"Ah me! I'm done fer I is afeerd."

"But I didn't dare move fer fear he'd plug me ag'in."

"I aimed true, an' I thought I hit him squar' in ther heart; but it jist seemed ter shake him up a leetle, an' afore I c'ud draw trigger ag'in he hed his lead inter me, an' I hed ter tumble."

"Lordy! I believes I are bleedin' ter death, an' it twenty mile ter camp; but I must be movin'."

He attempted to rise, and to his horror could not do so, but sunk back with a groan of anguish.

"Oh, Lord! I hes been plugged an' slashed often in my time, but this are ther awfulest time."

"Cuss him! I believes he hes give me my underground certifikit."

"An' cuss thet Monte too, fer he got me inter it, when I sh'u'd hev know'd better than ter fool with thet Dead Shot Dandy, fer he hain't no man ter be tuk in."

"Waal, I'll try ag'in ter git ter my horse an' see if I hain't able ter reach camp."

Once more he made an effort to rise, and again he fell back, a shriek of anguish breaking from his livid lips.

For full a minute he lay motionless, and then he gasped forth:

"My hour hev come, I knows, an' I hes got ter lay here an' think over all ther mean things I hes did ontill I dies."

"Pears ter me I hes been a all-fired mighty sinner; but ef I fergits anything I hes did, it's all down ag'in me, ther fort chaplain says, an' he oughter know, fer he's posted."

"Lord! Lord! hev marcy 'pon a miserable wretch!"

Again he remained quiet for a while and then said:

"Ef Dead Shot Dandy hed 'av' know'd he didn't kill me, he'd hev stayed right heur an' did all he c'ud fer me, as he are no slouch of a man."

"But he know'd his aim were sartin ef his horse were up in ther air, an' he jist rode right on, not stoppin' ter s'arch my pockets, which goes ter prove he are a squar' man, fer I'd s'arch a dead nigger's pockets."

"Oh, Lord! I is bleeding so I'll be drowned in my own blood ef I don't swim out."

And again he attempted to rise, to once more fall back with the same cry of anguish the movement wrung from his lips.

Suddenly he started, for the sound of approaching hoofs fell upon his ear, and opening his eyes he saw in the fading twilight a horseman coming directly toward him.

Raising his voice he called out:

"Hello, pard!"

The horseman halted, and then rode forward once more, while Bronze Bill muttered:

"If it's a foe he kin do me no harm, an' ef he's a friend he kin do me no good."

"But he'll help ter keep off ther ghosts thet I begins ter see crowdin' round me now."

CHAPTER III.

MONTE'S PLOT.

It was just light enough when the horseman rode up to Padre's Rock and drew rein, for the wounded man to recognize him, and he called out quickly:

"Ah! Monte, you here, an' come ter see me die?"

"Bronze Bill! Is it you?" and Monte the Mexican, for he it was, threw himself from his saddle and bent over the wounded man, whom he had sent forth a few hours before in full health and vigor, to commit a deadly crime.

"It are what is left o' me, an' what the coyotes will soon pick," was the reply.

"No, no, not as bad as that, Bill, I hope."

"It are jist as bad, fer I feel I hev ter pass in my chips afore long," sadly said Bronze Bill.

"But how is it that I find you dying, when I expected to find Dead Shot dead?"

"Waal, he were too quick fer me, an' his aim never fails, yer know."

"So you met him here?"

"I kinder feel as ef I did."

"And fired on him?"

"Yas."

"But missed him?"

"I'll never tell yer, pard, as ter thet; but I sat up yonder, hidin' in the bush, an' I drewed trigger on him when he war jist thar whar your horse be."

"I seen him kinder fall back as I shooted, but afore his horse c'd git away he hed checked him an' let me hev it."

"Did he see you?"

"No, but he seen whar ther shot come from an' he shooted ter hit, an' tho' I pulled trigger ag'in, down I tumbled an' here I are."

"And where is Dead Shot Dandy?"

"Ther Lord knows."

"Did he ride off?"

"I played 'possum, fer I thought I might git a present o' more lead, an' he said suthin' ter hisself about me bein' a coward an' rode away as pleasant as yer please."

"Curse him! so you failed to kill him," said Monte between his shut teeth.

"Yas, but thar is no doubt about his killin' me, pard, an' I won't want yer gold."

"But what is you doin' here?"

"I will tell you frankly, Bill, I half-way doubted you, and came to do the work myself; but I see I wronged you— Ha! I have it!"

"I will avenge you!"

"Yer'll get your toes turned up ef yer fools with Dead Shot Dandy, pard."

"I'll tell you what I will do, Bronze Bill, and you must help me."

"I are a lively feller ter help yer, now hain't I?"

"Perhaps you are not mortally wounded."

"I are."

"Let me see for myself."

"Don't move me, pard, fer ther good Lord's sake, fer I do believe my back are broke, as I cannot move."

The scout made no reply, but, gathering some brush, soon had a fire blazing near, and then set to work to examine the wound received by the hunter.

The most cursory examination proved to him that Bronze Bill must die, and he said:

"Bill, old fellow, you must go under."

"Didn't I tell yer so?"

"But I will avenge you; for, as soon as I have made you as comfortable as I can, I will ride hard to the fort and bring Surgeon Otey back with me, as also men with an ambulance."

"Twon't do no good, pard."

"Better fetch a coffin."

"It will do good, for you will live through the night, and you can tell them all that you had a quarrel with Dead Shot Dandy and he drew his revolver and shot you down."

"Tell them you saw Dead Shot talking to a Mexican whom you knew to be one of the Rio Grande Marauders, and accused him of being a traitor, when he fired on you, and, believing he had killed you, rode away."

"Yer wishes me ter tell a lie with what leetle breath I hes left?"

"What does that matter, when you will get revenge, for I will say that I met Dead Shot leaving here and he tried to send me off upon another trail, but his manner caused me to suspect something, and I came by here and found you wounded."

"I can be back here with Surgeon Otey within four hours."

"Pard Monte!" said Bronze Bill, impulsively.

"Well?"

"Do you think they will punish Dead Shot ef I tells thet lie?"

"Yes, he will be hanged, sure."

"Waal, I'll tell ther lie, ef I are here when yer gits back—"

"If you are here?"

"Yas, ef my speerit hain't crossed ther Big River."

"Ah, yes; well, I will go at once, and spare not the spur."

"One minute, pard Monte," called out Bronze Bill, as the scout was hastening to his horse, his desire for revenge against Dead Shot Dandy, for some reason, deadening his sympathy for the man whom he had been the means of placing where he then was.

"Well, talk quick, Bill."

"I will tell ther lie, but upon one condition."

"Speak out!"

"Yer knows I has a leetle darter livin' in San Antone?"

"I have heard you say so."

"She is at ther convent thar, an' her name are Lulu Dale, Bill Dale bein' my name when I were christened."

"Well, Bill?"

"I hain't but a leetle over a thousan' dollars ter leave her, an' you told me you'd give me five hundred in gold ter kill ther Dead Shot Dandy, and yer give me yer due bill fer thet amount."

"Yes, yes."

"Now I'll tell ther lie ef yer says yer'll go ter San Antone, hunt my leetle Lulu up an' give ter her my money, which are in ther paymaster's hands at ther fort, an' along with it, yer'll give her ther five hundred yer promised me."

"It is a bargain, if you tell the story I ask."

"Then I tells it fer my leetle darter's sake, an' may ther good Lord fergive me."

"Now get me a canteen o' water, an' fix my head a leetle higher, an' go to ther fort."

Monte almost impatiently obeyed these last requests of the dying hunter, and then, throwing himself into his saddle dashed away like the wind, leaving Bronze Bill lying in death-agonies in that lonely spot, the flickering firelight casting phantom-like shadows against the Padre's Rock, and the coyotes in the chaparrals, scenting human blood, yelping in anticipation of a feast before very long.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HUNTER'S CHARGE.

THOUGH a villain at heart, Bronze Bill was not a coward, and his nature was such that he would die game.

He knew that there was no hope for him, and he suffered agony, yet he did not murmur, as he lay still counting the fleeting moments go by.

Now and then his mind would wander, and wholly dropping the dialect of the border, he would talk away of a happy home he had once known as a boy upon his father's plantation.

But he had been wild and wayward, became dissipated, and in a drunken debauch had taken life and had to fly.

He had gone as a private in the army of invasion into Mexico, and was wounded and left at a hacienda where he was carefully cared for.

The Don had a young and lovely daughter who fell in love with him, as he did with her, and as soon as he was able to leave he fled from the hospitable roof with the maiden and sought a home in Texas.

Penniless, he had been forced to accept a position as cowboy, and this proving but a poor return for his young wife's trust in him, he had secretly leagued himself with a band of outlaws, and thus was enabled to give her a good support.

At last a child was born to William Dale and his Mexican wife, but their joy was soon clouded, as the health of Mrs. Dale begun to fail, and soon after she was laid in her grave.

Leaving his child in the care of kind friends, William Dale entered the service of the Government as a guide and scout, determined, for the sake of his child, to lead a better life.

And thus he drifted on for years, until once more he became the secret ally of bandits, and at the time of the opening of this story, was a

traitor to those he served at the fort, for as a hunter, he knew much of the movements of defenseless trains and unguarded posts, and informed the Marauders that they might strike to their advantage when and where booty was to be gained, and he be a sharer in their spoils.

All these memories crowded upon the dying man as he lay there alone in the chaparrals, and he could not but admit that his life had been one long mistake, filled with crime.

To his daughter he had been ever kind, visiting her once each year, and then casting aside his border dialect with his prairie costume, he would appear as the gentleman he once had been.

As a ranchero his daughter only knew him, and, as upon each visit he gave her ample money for her support and needs, both she and those that had the care of her believed him to be wealthy, and far different from what in reality he was.

At last, in one of his wandering moods which flashed over him every few minutes, he started, for his quick ear caught the sound of rapid hoof-falls.

"He are coming back but it hain't no use."

"Yes, the surgeon is with him, an' more, too," he muttered.

The fire had burned low, and all around seemed dismal in the extreme to three horsemen who dashed up to the Padre's Rock and threw themselves from their saddles.

"Ho, pard Bill, are you alive?" called out Monte, in suppressed tones, as though he feared to get no reply.

"I am," was the distinct answer.

"Good! for while there is life there is hope."

"See, I have brought Surgeon Otey, and Captain Cecil Lorne has come to hear your strange report about Dead Shot Dandy, and which seems hard to believe."

"Yes, it is hard to believe," said Bronze Bill, no longer speaking with the border slang and dialect, to the surprise of Monte and the officers.

"The ambulance is coming, and if possible we will remove you to comfortable quarters at the fort," continued Monte, who was surprised to find the man so strong, and hoped that the moving of him would kill him, as it was his dying statement he wanted against Dead Shot Dandy.

"I think you had better let me die here, for I suffer agony at the slightest movement," said Bronze Bill, quietly.

"We shall soon see, Bill," remarked Surgeon Otey kindly, as he bent over the wounded man, while Monte threw some brush upon the fire, causing a bright light.

Looking on, as he stood upright with his arms folded across his broad chest, was Captain Cecil Lorne, a young, handsome and dashing officer, the idol of the soldiers.

His handsome face was now sad, for he had come to listen to a severe charge, made by dying lips, against a man whom he loved as a brother, and one whom he owed his life to on more than one occasion.

"The wound is fatal, I am sorry to have to tell you, Bill," said Surgeon Otey.

"I knew it, sir, from the first," was the calm reply.

"And now, Bronze Bill, will you tell me just how you received this wound?" asked Captain Lorne.

"I told Monte, sir."

"And his report caused me to come and hear the truth from your lips."

"Well, sir, I came out from the fort, hoping to strike a herd of deer I knew were feeding down this way, and I came upon Dead Shot Dandy."

"You are sure that it was Duke Decatur, whom the boys call Dead Shot Dick?"

"Yes, sir, for I talked with him."

"He was with a Mexican, when I first saw him, whom I know to be one of the Marauder Band, but left him as he sighted me, and soon after I joined him."

"I asked him if he was selling out to the Marauders of the Rio Grande, and he got very angry, told me I should never say those words when suspicion should fall on him, and before I was aware of what he would do, he shot me."

"I fell from my horse, and he rode away and left me here to die, but believed I was dead."

"And this is your dying statement?"

"It is, Captain Lorne."

"And dying, you make this charge against Dead Shot Dandy?"

"I do."

"Were it from other than the lips of a dying man, I would not believe it of Duke Decatur," hotly said the young officer.

"Nor I, Lorne; but now there can be no

doubt, for Monte says that he met Dead Shot near here, and he tried to prevent his coming by the Padre's Rock," remarked Surgeon Otey.

"It is hard to believe, sir, but it is true," put in Monte, and then, seeing that Bronze Bill wished to speak with him, he said, as he leaned over:

"What is it, my poor pard?"

"You know I asked you to get my money from the paymaster?" said Bronze Bill, in a tone meant to reach the ears of both the officers.

"Yes."

"It amounts to twelve hundred dollars."

"So you said."

"Then in my pocket I have another hundred."

"Yes."

"And you have of my money fifteen hundred dollars?"

"No, five hundred, you remember, Bill?"

"You forget the last thousand I won from you, Monte," said Bronze Bill in a tone so significant, that the gambler scout could not fail to understand that he had him in his power, and was going to make the best of it for the benefit of his daughter.

Monte gritted a curse between his teeth, but said:

"Oh yes, the odd thousand dollars of winnings I hold for you?"

"Yes, and that makes altogether twenty-eight hundred dollars, does it not?"

"Yes."

"Well, my traps, weapons and horses will bring a couple of hundred more, and I authorize Captain Cecil Lorne to sell them for me, and you are to pay over to him the fifteen hundred you owe me."

"Then he will draw from the paymaster my money due, and give all to my daughter."

"You asked me to do so," said Monte.

"I did when no one else was here; but I ask Captain Lorne to do so now."

"Will you do so, captain?"

"I will do anything I can for you, Bill."

"But where is your daughter?"

"She is at the convent in San Antonio, and her name is Lulu Dale."

"Tell her that I was killed, and dying, left her the money with my blessing."

"It is all I have to leave her, tell her; but do not let her know that I was a hunter at the post, for frankly, captain, she believed me to be a ranchero, and I never went to see her as Bronze Bill, but as the gentleman I once knew how to be."

"Yes, it is evident that you have once been very different from what we have believed you, Bill."

"But I will get the money from Monte and the paymaster, sell your traps and horses, and deliver all to your daughter."

"And you won't tell her that I was a poor hunter?"

"No, I will respect your dying wishes."

"God bless you, captain."

"Now I am ready to die, and the sooner the better, for I shall be out of pain, and can no longer think, and thought hurts now most bitterly."

Captain Lorne sat down by the wounded man and kindly took his hand, while Surgeon Otey administered some opiates to him, and he sunk into a stupor just as the ambulance dashed up, escorted by a guard of half a dozen soldiers.

"Will you attempt to remove him, Otey?" asked Captain Lorne.

The surgeon laid his hand upon the pulse and said quietly:

"There is no use; let the soldiers bury him here, for he is dead."

"Thank God!" came from between the shut lips of Monte as he heard the words.

CHAPTER V.

THE BOY BUGLER.

A HORSEMAN was riding slowly across the rolling prairies, just at twilight.

A new moon was lengthening out the light, and rendering objects visible some distance off.

Beyond the horseman half a mile was visible a clump of timbers, a prairie island, a *motte*, as they are called in Texas, and it was evident that he was making his way there to encamp for the night.

As the new moon cast its light upon him, the face and form of Dead Shot Dandy were revealed.

Suddenly he drew rein, for his quick ears caught a sound in the distance.

"They are wolves, and they have run down some game, or are snarling over some dead body," he muttered.

Again he resumed his onward way, to once more draw rein and listen attentively.

Distinctly upon the night-air arose the notes of a bugle, stilling the howlings of the wolves in the timber, as though charming them into silence.

A few stirring blasts were given, and then in soft cadence, clear and sympathetic, was begun the familiar strains of that never-to-be-forgotten melody, "Home, Sweet Home."

"There is a squad of cavalry encamped in the timber; but I knew not that a party was away from the fort," said Dead Shot Dandy to himself as he rode on.

There now became visible one camp-fire, and it was not blazing very brightly, but then the night was warm.

From one melody into another floated the strains of the bugle, and all were played with such a tone of sympathy, and in such a masterly manner, that the scout said aloud:

"I wonder who it can be, for no one at the fort can play as he does."

Riding slowly, that he might not miss the strains, it was some time before he rode up to the timber.

To his surprise no sentinel halted him, and he saw no forms of men or horses by the light of the single fire.

As he rode into the timber he seemed to feel oppressed from some reason he could not explain, and he halted quickly, as the bugle-notes suddenly came to an end.

"Hello! who is here?"

He called out in a loud tone, for he did not wish to take the chances of a shot, and he had his rifle ready for instant use.

As he spoke he gazed around him as well as he could, and beheld dimly a wagon or two, and then some dark objects lying here and there upon the ground, while again the howling of hungry wolves began.

"Ho! what camp is this?"

He called out more loudly than before, and then saw a form rise from beyond the camp-fire, and come slowly toward him.

"Ah! my man, I thought all were asleep."

"What camp is this?" asked Dead Shot Dandy, as the person advanced toward him, while he also moved his horse forward to meet him.

"It is Death's camp now, sir," came the answer, in a boyish voice, and Dead Shot saw before him the slender form of a youth of fourteen.

He was clad in buckskin, wore boots, and a slouch hat, and about his waist was a belt of arms.

In one hand he carried a revolver, and in the other a cornet, evidently the instrument that the scout had just heard played with such skill.

By the firelight Dead Shot Dick saw a well-formed boy, with a handsome face, fearless and resolute, but touchingly sad just then, and haggard, as with sorrow and suffering.

His eyes were large and black, and his hair was worn long, falling in curls upon his shoulders.

In the background were several wagons, and here and there lay a human body, which showed that some tragic scene had been enacted there, and that it was indeed, as the boy had said, "Death's camp."

Springing from his saddle, Dead Shot Dandy advanced toward the youth, while he said, quickly:

"My God! what has happened here, my boy?"

"A massacre, sir," was the calm reply.

"A massacre of whom, and by whom?"

"All I loved, sir, were massacred here last night, and those who did the cruel deed were the Rio Grande Marauders," sadly said the boy.

"My poor young friend, there has indeed been red work done here, and you have been a great sufferer. But where are the others of the camp?"

"Most of them are in their graves, and there are the rest, which I intended burying tomorrow," and he pointed to the dead bodies.

"Do you mean to say that you are all alone in this dread place?"

"Yes, sir. I am all alone in this wide world now," and tears came into the dark eyes.

"No, my boy, for I shall be your friend. Now tell me all you know about this affair?"

"It is soon told, sir. My father, mother, brother, sister, and myself were on our way to seek a new home, for father had been left a small ranch a hundred miles north of here. We had two old servants with us, a guide, three wagons, an ambulance, and a dozen horses, and camped here for the night. My pony got loose, and I went after him, and thus my life was

saved, for when I returned late at night, all were dead, excepting the guide, and he was dying, but told me that the Rio Grande Marauders had attacked the camp, and killed all. I fell in a swoon, and it was just sunrise when I came to my senses. I drove the wolves away, and for a long time was overcome with grief. At last I determined to bury my poor parents and a little I dug a large grave, and placed in it my father, mother, and brother, who was younger than I am, but I could not find my sister's body, and have not yet done so. There lie the servants and the guide, and I intended to bury them to-morrow."

"And you were playing that cornet?"

"Yes, sir, I felt so lonely I played to keep from going mad."

"My poor boy, from my heart I pity you. But come; do not give way to your grief, for friends will be found in plenty, and I will be a brother to you. Now, tell me, have you made thorough search for your sister?"

"Everywhere, sir."

"How old is she?"

"Just two years older than I am, sir, and I am nearly fifteen."

"Ah!" and it was evident that Dead Shot Dandy felt that he could account for the absence of the maiden's body.

"Do you think they have carried Lou off, sir?" asked the boy, as though divining the scout's thoughts.

"They may have done so, hoping for ransom, my boy."

"What is your name?"

"Benito Dewhurst, sir. My mother was a Mexican and her maiden name was Benito."

"And your father was an American?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Benito, all we can do now is to bury the guide and the servants, and in the morning decide what is best to be done."

"As for yourself, you are my little brother now, and must go with me."

"I will be so glad, sir, for I like you, and have no one else to love now, for I fear I shall never see poor Lou again."

"Perhaps you may, so do not give up hope," was the scout's assuring reply.

Then he set to work and the dead were soon buried, and the booty, left by the Marauders, was gathered together, to be packed upon the horse which Benito had ridden off in chase of his pony, those two animals thus escaping being carried off by the raiders.

When all was ready, the two lay down to sleep and await the coming dawn, intending then to start for the fort, for Dead Shot Dandy wished the boy to make his report to the commanding officer as soon as possible, so that troopers could strike the trail of the Marauders and go in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MUSTANGS' FLIGHT.

FORT BLANK was one of the most delightful posts upon the Texas border, and its situation was upon the prairie, with a pleasant country not far distant.

There was timber near, a stream running through the grounds, a substantial stockade fortification, with pleasant quarters for the officers and men.

Near by, over in another clump of timber was what was known as Fort Village, and there were congregated the settlers, hunters, trappers, and hangers on of the post, and a wild lot many of them were, only held in subjection by the military so near at hand.

In the fort proper there were about two hundred soldiers, the greater part being cavalry, with a company of infantry and another of light artillery.

Then there was a force of scouts, hunters and guides, numbering two score more, and chief of these was Dead Shot Dandy, with Monte next in command.

Over in Fort Village there were about two hundred souls, so that if the latter was drawn upon for volunteers, a very respectable little army could go into the field at short notice.

Colonel Du Barry, the commandant, was a dashing, noble-hearted officer, whose family of a wife and daughter, preferred living with him beyond the pale of civilization, to being separated from him, and this circumstance had brought to the post the families of some of the junior officers, until quite a little community dwelt there.

With all, from the colonel down, Dead Shot Dandy was a favorite, and the mystery that

hung about him caused him to be a personage to be regarded with a certain awe, for all saw that he was a man of refinement and education, content, from some strange motive unknown to others to live a wild life upon the plains.

His wonderful skill as a trailer, his undaunted courage, and prowess, added to his many gallant deeds in battle and alone on the trail, had brought him up to be chief of scouts, while his horsemanship and deadly aim with rifle and revolver were something wonderful.

That this man, seemingly the soul of honor, had murdered Bronze Bill created a great surprise in the fort.

That he had been seen talking to one of the band of the Rio Grande Marauders, also implied that he knew something regarding them, and strange whispers went round as to the secret having been at last solved by this, as to how the Marauders had become aware of certain movements of the troops, and often of valuable trains, which had been attacked and robbed.

That there was a spy in the camp all had suspected, though no one knew whom to accuse.

Now, with the charges against Dead Shot Dandy, it looked as though he was the traitor.

Bronze Bill had been buried where he fell, near Padre's Rock, and back to the fort had Captain Cecil Lorne come with the sad tidings learned from the lips of the dying man.

It had fallen like a thunderbolt into the camp, and few would at first believe it.

But when Monte told of his meeting with Dead Shot, and his anxiety not to have him go to the Padre's Rock, added to the confession as to who had shot him, coming from the lips of a dying man, there seemed no room for doubt.

To try and find Dead Shot would be time thrown away, so they must await his return to the fort, which, believing that he had killed Bronze Bill, he would doubtless do, thinking no one would suspect him.

Anxiously all waited, the sentinels keeping their eyes constantly scanning the prairies, but without discerning the expected scout.

The effects of Bronze Bill, his horses, traps, weapons and trophies of the hunt had been put up at auction by Captain Lorne, who had made known the circumstances of why they were sold, and readily they were bought at high prices, so that the young officer had a few hundreds of dollars over the expected amount, to hand to the poor orphan girl in San Antonio.

He had gotten from the paymaster the amount he held for Bronze Bill, and also had received the fifteen hundred from Monte, who paid it over without a word, and, as soon as Dead Shot Dandy returned to the fort, Captain Lorne intended to start for San Antonio to see Lulu Dale.

But he did not care to leave until he had seen the scout, whom he hoped could explain away the charge against him in some manner.

The afternoon of the second day after the tragedy at Padre's Rock, Marie Du Barry, the lovely daughter of the colonel, was breaking in a new mustang which Dead Shot Dandy had caught wild and given her, when, as she was riding in an extended circle around the fort, she spied at a distance what she at first supposed to be three horsemen.

The wild mustang at the same time caught sight of a herd of wild ponies far off on the prairie, and, in spite of all that his fair rider could do, dashed toward them with the speed of the wind.

His course lay so as to head them off in their wild gallop, and in vain did the young girl tug at the severe bit to check his speed.

A stallion, and formerly the king of the wild herd, he intended to take his place at their head once more, and well did the maiden realize what might be her fate did he once gain the flying drove.

"They will tear me to pieces with their sharp teeth, or I will be thrown and trampled beneath their feet. Ah! I was foolish to ride this far from the fort," she cried in horror at her situation.

A roll of prairie hid her from the view of the sentinels at the fort, and the herd of mustangs, half a thousand in number, were too far off to be seen by the guards, so that it would not be suspected that the maiden was in deadly peril.

For a moment she had forgotten the horsemen she had seen, but now glanced eagerly toward them.

Two only were visible then, but a second look showed her that one was far away, riding like an arrow shot from a bow to head her off.

"Thank God! help is at hand," she gasped, and her hands let fall the reins, for she was almost unnerved.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESCUE AND THE WARNING.

As long as she had had to depend wholly upon herself, Marie Du Barry had pulled, with a strength she had not believed she possessed, upon the reins, to check the wild mustang; but when she saw that one horseman was riding to her aid, she had become partially unnerved, and no longer offered any resistance to the mad flight of the mustang.

Perhaps because she recognized the horseman that she placed dependence in him, for otherwise she would not have thought that the man could aid her.

A second glance at the one who had seen her peril, and was determined to save her, if in his power, showed her a long-bodied, slender-limbed black animal, with neck outstretched, going at a speed that no other horse on the prairies had been known to equal.

And in the saddle, rifle in hand ready for use, if needed, sat a tall form well known to her, for often before had she seen it; and more, upon another occasion, when, riding out with Cecil Lorne, they were pursued by red-skins, and gave up all hope, that some one had come to the rescue and saved their lives.

"It is the scout," she murmured, and then, a moment after came the words:

"I will warn him of his danger, so that he can fly, for he has not yet been seen from the fort."

Nearer and nearer her wild mustang drew to the coming herd, and harder and harder rode the scout to intercept her.

Could he do so?

Would even the splendid black he rode be able to keep up that killing pace to which he was driven?

Nearer and nearer came the mustang to the herd, and nearer and nearer the scout to both.

At last but a hundred yards intervened between the mustang king and his herd, and the same distance the scout had to ride, to reach the maiden's side.

Suddenly, his repeating rifle leaped to his shoulder, and shot after shot peeled forth into the head of the herd, dropping animal after animal, and making them sway wildly.

The next instant he dashed near enough to throw his lasso over the head of the mustang king, while he cried in thrilling tones:

"Hold on for life's sake, Miss Du Barry!"

The lasso settled over the head of the mustang, the thoroughly-trained black settled back quickly upon his haunches, and the shock dragged the wild animal to his knees, while, with a revolver in each hand Dead Shot Dandy began to fire into the head of the herd sweeping over them, dropping a barrier of dead horses, in their front, which must force them to turn aside and pass around them.

At the same instant Dead Shot Dandy called out in ringing tones that arose above the thunder of the hoofs:

"Hold on hard! for if you are thrown, death is certain."

Once he had checked the flight of the mustang, Dead Shot Dandy left his own faithful animal to hold him, while he sprang from the saddle and rushed to the side of the struggling beast.

Watching his chance he dragged Marie Du Barry from her saddle, and a bound took him to the pile of horses he had slain, just as the mass the herd dashed up.

When firing his revolvers he had used those from his saddle holsters, and now he stood upon the body of a dead animal, and with Marie crouching behind him, he began to fire upon the advancing herd.

Rapidly they opened a lane to the right and left, and soon all had passed by, leaving the scout and maiden in safety, and with the noble black still standing firm, and with the wild mustang, the cause of the mischief, choked down upon the ground.

Springing to him Dead Shot Dandy loosened the noose, and soon the animal arose to his feet, thoroughly tamed, just as Benito, the Boy Bugler, was seen in the distance coming toward them.

"Ah, Mr. Decatur, I owe you my life, for you have rescued me from a fearful death, and now I wish to save you, so bid you not to go near the fort, but to fly while you can," cried Marie Du Barry earnestly grasping the scout's hands.

She saw his look of surprise, and then he asked:

"But why should I not go to the fort, Miss Du Barry?"

"Because—because—oh! Mr. Decatur, you are denounced as a murderer."

He started and turned deadly pale, but asked in a calm voice:

"Who dares make this charge against me?"

"The one you are said to have slain."

"And who is he?"

"The hunter, Bronze Bill."

"And he is dead?"

"Yes."

"And before dying said that I was his murderer?"

"He did."

"This is remarkable."

"He made such a confession while dying, and, although my father did not wish to believe it, and your other friends too had faith in you, circumstantial evidence is fearfully strong against you, and already you are called a murderer, and you will be shot as such if you go to the fort, so I warn you not to go."

"But I will go, Miss Du Barry, and face these charges!"

"Pray do not; for your death will follow."

"You are not bound to the fort by any ties, other than as a scout, and the world is large."

"You can go elsewhere and live, and save your life."

"You served me well once, and it was in the hope of meeting you, and warning you that I rode out so far on the prairie this afternoon."

"Now, I beg of you, do not go there."

"I thank you from my inmost heart, Miss Du Barry, for your nobleness in warning me of danger in store for me."

"But I am not guilty of the charge against me, and I shall go to the fort and face the consequences, be they what they may."

"Will you mount your own horse, for he is tamed now, or shall I transfer your saddle to my animal?"

"I will ride the mustang, thank you, but I am sorry you will not heed my warning."

"Who is that coming?"

"A poor boy, the only survivor of a massacre that occurred below here some forty miles, and the pack-horse he leads carries all of the worldly goods belonging to him."

"Let me aid you to your saddle."

As lightly as though she had been a child he placed her in her saddle, and mounting his own horse, just as Benito rode up, the three turned the heads of their horses toward the fort, Marie Du Barry pale and anxious because Dead Shot Dandy would not heed her warning of peril to him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RETURN.

WHEN the party of three rode over a roll of the prairie, that brought them in full view of the fort, they suddenly came upon Colonel Du Barry and several officers riding in hot haste, their mission being to search for the maiden, whom the sentinel had reported as disappearing at a pace that caused him to think her horse was running away with her.

They came to a sudden halt upon seeing Marie, and that she was not alone.

As the scout and his two companions rode up, Colonel Du Barry saw that something had gone wrong, and instantly he cried:

"Marie, my child, you are as white as death."

"Pray tell me what has happened?"

"Father, I for the second time owe my life to your chief of scouts, for he saved me from a horrible fate."

"See! across the prairie yonder you observe those dark objects?"

"They are wild mustangs, and were shot by Mr. Decatur to save me, for this wicked brute ran with me to take his place at the head of the herd once more."

"Mr. Decatur saw my danger, and, at the risk of his own life, saved mine."

"Great Heaven! what a death you have escaped, and you, Dead Shot, have the warmest thanks a father can give," and the colonel's voice trembled as he spoke, while he did not look the scout in the face.

Then, in a few words, Marie told all as it had happened, and added:

"Father, to show my gratitude I told Mr. Decatur of the charges made against him, and frankly I tell you, I urged him to fly and save his life, but he would not do so."

"Would to God he had," almost groaned the colonel, while Marie continued:

"He said that he was guiltless of the charge and would go on to the fort and take the consequences."

"Decatur, from my soul I hope you can prove that you are innocent, but it looks very black against you just now, and I must hold you as a prisoner."

"Lieutenant Frayne, take charge of the scout, and, upon our arrival at the fort, put him in the guard-house."

"Yes, sir," answered the young officer.

"Now, who have you here?" and Colonel Du Barry turned to the Boy Bugler.

Instantly Dead Shot Dandy answered, as he handed his weapons coolly over to the young officer:

"This youth, Colonel Du Barry, I found in Smoky Timber *motte*."

"I was scouting in the neighborhood last night, heard a bugle playing 'Home Sweet Home,' and riding up, expecting to find a military camp, this boy is all who met me."

"He was with his parents, sister and brother, and several others, on the way to his father's ranch, when their camp was attacked by the Rio Grande Marauders."

"The boy was absent, searching for his pony, and thus escaped the massacre—"

"Massacre?"

"Yes, Colonel Du Barry, for all were massacred excepting his sister, a maiden of seventeen, whose body we could not find, and I suppose she was carried off by the Marauders."

"This is terrible, indeed."

"It is, sir, and I found the poor boy seated by his desolate camp-fire, playing his cornet, and a touching sight it was."

"He had buried his parents, and together we placed the other bodies in the grave, and then I brought him with me, knowing that, with his skill as a bugler, you would be anxious to give him a place in the regiment."

"Indeed, yes; but when did this occur, my poor boy?" said the colonel, kindly.

"Three nights ago, sir."

"And when did you leave Smoky Timber?"

"This morning, sir, about sunrise," answered the youth.

"And when did you find him, Dead Shot?"

"Shortly after dark last night, Colonel Du Barry."

"Where were you the day and night before?"

"Upon the prairie, sir, scouting along a trail which I now know was made by the same band of Marauders who attacked this boy's train."

"How many were there in the band?"

"The trail showed about twenty, sir."

"And you could find no trace of the body of this brave boy's sister?"

"None, sir."

"What is your theory regarding her disappearance?"

"That she has been carried off to be held for ransom."

"Well, I shall at once send Captain Lorne upon their trail, for you can tell him where to strike it, and endeavor to rescue her."

"I will gladly go with the captain, sir."

"No, Dead Shot, for you are under arrest on a severe charge."

"Ah! I had forgotten that," was the cool reply of the scout.

Riding by the side of the young boy, Colonel Du Barry found out his name and all the particulars regarding him, and became so much interested in him that he said, as they neared the fort:

"Well, Benito, you shall have the berth of my bugler who went home on sick leave the other day, and you may rest assured that I will do all in my power to find your sister and restore her to you."

And Mr. Decatur, sir, you will not punish him for a crime which he cannot be guilty of?" urged the boy.

"Well, I hope he can prove his innocence before the court-martial who try him as he has before me," was the answer.

A moment after the party rode into the fort, and Duke Decatur was led away to the guard-house and put in irons to await his trial upon a charge which, if found guilty, would send him to his grave.

CHAPTER IX.

GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY.

THE rumor of the return of Dead Shot Dandy spread like wild-fire through the fort, and then floated off to Fort Village, where it created a great excitement.

Next was told the story of his rescue of Marie Du Barry, and some who were his foes hinted that it would be the cause of getting him white-washed of the charge of having killed Bronze Bill.

Then the massacre in Smoky Timber Motte became known, and the circumstances of how Dead Shot had found the little waif, and in Fort Village some were unkind enough to hint that it

was a put-up job to clear himself, his bringing the boy back with him.

But rumors and aspersions were not facts, and all knew that they must await the trial.

If Dead Shot had not found the boy as he said, who, then, was the youth, and where did he come from?

There was one thing certain, and that was when the notes of the bugle rung through the fort that night, played by the Boy Waif, one and all had to admit that never before had a bugle been made to send forth such strains over that camp.

Whether he felt that in music he could soothe his sorrow, no one knew, but the poor boy ran from one melody into another, playing with a skill that was wonderful and a pathos that brought tears to many eyes, as if his very soul was going out in sympathy for his lost ones in the strains which went floating over the prairie, filling the air with melody.

And thus for a long time the Boy Bugler sat playing his silver cornet, no one caring to stop him, and many sorry when at last he ceased.

"Can I stay in the guard-house with Dead Shot, sir?" he asked Colonel Du Barry, calling the scout by the name which he was best known by in the fort.

"Yes, if you wish it, my boy; but you will have to be locked in with him."

"I do not care for that, sir, and I will be up bright and early in the morning."

"Yes, for Captain Lorne may return by that time with some news of the Marauders."

And so Benito Dewhurst went to the guard-house and slept on the cot next to Dead Shot, after the two had talked together until a late hour.

But before sunrise he was out and attending to his duties, just as Captain Lorne rode into the fort, followed by his squad of cavalymen.

The horses were jaded and the riders looked worn out, for they had had a long and hard ride.

To the colonel he made his report.

He had struck the trail of the Marauders just where Dead Shot told him he would find it, and had pursued it to the Rio Grande.

Across the river he dared not go; but from those who had seen the band cross he had learned that there was no maiden with them.

They had many horses laden down with booty, and had ridden hard; but out of a dozen who had seen them, not one was there but was positive that there were only men in the party.

A Mexican *padre* had been halted by them, and gave absolute ion to a dying Mexican, whom they were carrying back severely wounded, and he, too, said that there was not a prisoner, male or female, in the clutches of the Marauders.

"What can have become of the girl?" asked Colonel Du Barry.

"I cannot tell, sir, unless she may have escaped in the darkness out upon the prairie," answered Cecil Lorne.

"Ah! such might have been the case; but alone, unarmed and a mere child, she would soon fall a victim to wild beasts."

"I fear that such has been her fate; but as I wish a party to visit the scene of the massacre, and then ride with all haste from Padre's Rock to note the time that it can be ridden in, I will have Lieutenant Lancaster go at once, so that he can be back for the trial of Dead Shot to-morrow, and he can make a circuit of Smoky Timber in search of the missing girl."

Half an hour after Lieutenant Lancaster had his orders from the colonel, and with six troopers and Monte as guide and scout, rode away from the fort to the scene of the massacre.

Late the following morning they returned to the fort, just as Dead Shot was summoned from the guard-house for trial.

The prisoner was perfectly calm, almost indifferent and yet showed surprise when Captain Lorne gave the dying testimony of Bronze Bill against him.

This testimony of a man then in his grave was corroborated by Monte the scout, in a measure, who told of his meeting with Dead Shot, and his desire not to have him go by Padre Rock.

Then Dead Shot was asked what he had to say for himself, and he told of the conversation between himself and Bronze Bill, and which opens this story.

"My intention," he said, "was to go up to Padre's Rock, and thence up the river to see if the Marauders had crossed at any point."

"But I struck a trail two miles off which I followed, and it led me far to the south."

"I camped that night at Lone Tree Spring, and the next night it was that I was at Smoky Timber, where I found Benito, the Boy Bug-

ler, which is over seventy miles from Padre's Rock, coming by the fort, and further, if I had to go around the Red Chaparral."

"I have not been near Padre's Rock for ten days, and all I have to say is that Bronze Bill died a perjured liar, that man, Mexican Monte, lives with the lie in his throat when he says that he met me."

Monte dropped his hand upon his revolver at these bold words, but quick as a flash he was covered by a weapon in the hands of the Boy Bugler, who cried in tones as clear as his bugle notes:

"No firing upon a man in irons!"

All started at the ringing words, which brought upon the boy the gaze of every eye, and Colonel Du Barry who had not noticed Monte's action, said sternly:

"How dare you touch a weapon, sir, in the presence of this court-martial?"

"I was cut by the lie thrown in my teeth, sir, and I humbly beg the pardon of the Honorable Court," humbly said Monte, though his dark face flushed one instant and became livid the next with suppressed passion.

Then the Boy Bugler said, with a manner that was not expected of one of his age:

"And I too humbly beg pardon, but I feared the coward would kill Dead Shot."

"It is granted, my boy; and if you, Monte, cannot control your temper, I will have you disarmed," said the colonel.

"I will not offend again," was the low reply.

"It is hard, Decatur, to believe that a dying man would speak falsely," said an officer of the court-martial.

"It is strange indeed, sir, that a man would die with a lie upon his lips; but Bronze Bill did so die when he saw me at Padre's Rock."

Benito then told of the scout's arrival at the *motte*.

"Was his horse tired?" he was asked by the prosecuting officer.

"No, sir, but on the contrary he seemed not at all jaded."

"How do you know this?"

"While Dead Shot was digging the graves, I unsaddled his horse and staked him out with my animals."

"Did he speak of where he had been the day before?"

"Yes, sir, he told me when he had left the fort, and how he had intended going to the north, but struck a trail which brought him to Smoky Timber, and he said that Providence had guided his way so that he found me."

"And you rode the distance, Lieutenant Lancaster, from Smoky Timber to Padre's Rock?" asked the prosecuting officer.

"I did, sir."

"What distance would you call it?"

"Coming by the fort fully seventy miles."

"And by the Red Chaparral?"

"Over one hundred miles."

Then the officers of the court-martial consulted together, and Colonel Du Barry said:

"Decatur, circumstantial evidence, were we not inclined to mercy, would condemn you to death, for the charge against you came from the lips of a dying man and Monte here says that he too saw you near Padre's Rock."

"Besides, Lieutenant Lancaster affirms that the distance from Padre's Rock and Smoky Timber could have been ridden by you under pressure, in the time between the killing of Bronze Bill and your arrival at the scene of the massacre of the Benito family."

"Benito says though, that your horse was not jaded, and I rode to-day myself, accompanied by a scout, to where you said you turned from your course north, and followed your trail for miles circling around to the south, and this is in your favor."

"You are such a remarkable looking man, that I know of no one upon these prairies that could impersonate you."

"Yet, under all the circumstances, and the aid you gave my daughter in her dire peril, the court-martial spares your life, but reduces you to the ranks among the scouting company, of which Monte is now made chief."

"And one word more—if you can clear up this mystery and shadow hanging over you, all of us will be delighted to have you do so, and more, you shall be reinstated to your position of chief of scouts."

Dead Shot Dandy merely bowed in silence, while Benito sprang forward and grasped his hands, at the same time unlocking his irons with the key handed him by the sergeant of the guard.

Turning haughtily upon his heel, with no thanks for his life to the court-martial, the scout strode away to his quarters, followed by

Benito, while Monte remarked, in a tone loud enough for all to hear:

"That man means me mischief, because, as in duty bound, I told the truth about him."

CHAPTER X.

AN UNERRING SHOT.

AFTER the trial of Dead Shot Dandy, no one could notice any change in him as to whether he felt his having been reduced from chief to an ordinary scout.

His manner to all was just the same as before, and to Monte, the new chief, he was ever respectful, and obeyed every command with promptness.

He had asked to go off on a scout, and had been absent for days, but made no important report upon his return, though he and Benito were seen earnestly conversing together upon their return.

But those two were always together when not on duty, and had become inseparable pals, the man loving the boy as though he were his own brother, while Benito seemed to idolize the scout.

The colonel and officers all wished to treat Dead Shot well, for few of them could believe him guilty; but he avoided all of them as much as possible, and, when not on duty, kept at his own quarters.

One day Captain Lorne started forth upon a scouting expedition with fifty troopers and twenty scouts, under command of Monte.

Benito, the Boy Bugler also went along, and the party were well mounted and thoroughly armed, while they carried provisions for a week's stay.

Striking an Indian trail, they followed to the hills, and the young captain boldly determined to attack the red-skins in their village, which Dead Shot reported was but two miles away.

Of course he knew that the Indian warriors outnumbered him ten to one, but then he knew his men, and expected much from a surprise.

It was just at dawn when they rode down upon the camp, Benito's bugle ringing forth a wild and thrilling charge.

The first man into the camp was Dead Shot Dandy, and all who followed him saw two warriors go down beneath his unerring aim.

Surprised as they were the red-skins did not quickly rally, and the village was nearly won before they made a very determined stand.

But then a hundred warriors banded together and made a desperate charge upon the troopers, pressing them back before them in a huddled mass.

In vain did Cecil Lorne strive to break their front with his troopers and scouts, for on they came with revengeful cries, and, hemmed in as they were with a cliff behind them, it looked as if a massacre must certainly follow.

But suddenly, in the rear of the Indians came two horsemen, charging at full speed, their reins in their teeth, and a revolver in each hand.

Then merry was the music of those four revolvers, and every shot told with such deadly effect, that the red-skins wavered, broke, and fled to the right and left.

Just then, however, a horse went down, pinioning his rider beneath him, while a huge chief, maddened with desperation, sprung upon the helpless man.

It was Monte, the chief of scouts, and another second would have ended his earthly career, when a bullet, sent from a revolver twenty yards distant, crashed through the brain of the red-skin, who dropped dead upon the body of his intended victim.

Quickly his men drew their chief out from beneath his foe's body, and springing to his feet he cried:

"What friend of mine fired that shot?"

"Dead Shot Dandy," answered a dozen voices in chorus.

Monte made no reply, but turned away muttering:

"I have feared that he would kill me in the fight, and lo! he has saved my life."

And those two who had also saved the day were none other than Dead Shot Dandy and the Boy Bugler, who had dashed away from the command in pursuit of flying red-skins, and returned to aid their comrades or perish with them.

When the village was in his possession Cecil Lorne warmly thanked the scout and the Boy Bugler for their gallant services, but, though Monte stood by not one word did he utter to the man who had saved his life by his long and unerring shot.

With the prisoner, wounded and booty of the Indian camp, the little command started upon

their return to the fort, greatly elated over their victory, and the lesson which they had taught the red-skins.

"Where is Dead Shot?" asked Monte, as they rode along on the trail to the fort.

"He asked my permission to go upon the trail of the Indians that escaped, to find out where there was another village located," answered Captain Lorne.

"I wish you had spoken to me, Captain Cecil, and I would have detailed you a far better man," said the chief of scouts, evidently annoyed.

Cecil Lorne's face flushed, and he said, quickly:

"I am not in the habit, sir, of consulting my inferiors as to my duty, and as for a better man than Dead Shot Dandy, there is not his equal as a scout on these prairies."

Monte wisely held his peace and rode on in silence, for Cecil Lorne was not a man to trifle with.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DOUBLE MYSTERY.

THERE was certainly rejoicing in Fort Blank, when Captain Cecil and his men arrived with the account of their victory.

The Indians had not been dealt a severe blow of late, and had become very troublesome, while they had managed to elude pursuit in nearly every instance.

All were forced to admit that Dead Shot Dandy had been the cause of the victory, by leading the command to the Indian village, and had then, with Benito, the Boy Bugler, saved the party from a massacre, and, from Cecil Lorne he had received full credit.

Also, it was told how he had saved the life of Monte, the chief of scouts, and the very ungracious way which the favor had been received.

The second night after their return to the post, Monte was seated in his adobe cabin, playing cards with some congenial spirits.

The doors and windows were open, and the tin sconce upon the wall gave ample light.

Suddenly, following quickly upon the distant report of a rifle, a bullet whirled into the cabin, just grazing the cheek of the chief scout and drawing blood.

All sprung to their feet in alarm, while the Mexican, feeling that he was not seriously harmed, stepped forward and began digging the bullet out of the clay wall where it had buried itself.

Soon it was in his hand, and unmarred by its contact with the wall.

"It came from the timber yonder, and there is but one rifle in this camp that can carry a bullet as true at such a distance," remarked Monte.

"What gun are they?" asked a scout.

"You all know the rifle, and to whom it belongs."

"When the man returns to camp I will see if the bullet fits his rifle," was the reply.

"You hints that it are Dead Shot," said one.

"Yes."

"Waal yer hints wrong, fer he hain't thet kind o' a man," was the indignant reply of the man who befriended the absent scout.

"Waal, we shall see."

"We'll see, pard, thet you is on ther wrong trail."

"Why it hain't three days since he saved yer life, an' durned ef yer hed ther narve ter thank him fer it."

"Keno Kit, do you wish to quarrel with me?" asked Monte.

"No, I hain't pertickeler about it one way or t'other; but I are pertickeler thet yer don't accuse a man like Dead Shot o' fightin' mean."

"Well, drop it— Oh! boy, what do you want?"

The last remark of Monte was to Benito, who just then entered the cabin.

"I come from Colonel Du Barry, man, to order you to take ten men and go off on a twenty-mile circuit of the fort, as a ranchero has arrived with reports that Indians are scouting in the vicinity," answered Benito, emphasizing the man, as he did not like the way Monte called him boy.

"All right, boy, I will start at once, say to the colonel."

"Very well, man; but has anything scared you, for you look as white as a ghost?"

Monte muttered an oath, while Keno Kit said, provokingly:

"He hev been shot at from over in ther timber yonder."

"Shot at?"

"Yas, Benito, an' he got it thar on ther cheek, whar yer sees thet scratch."

"Yes, I see."

"We was sittin' heur playin' a peaceful game o' keards, when a bullet sailec in, an' ther chief do say thet he thinks it were Dead Shot Dandy thet did it."

"If you say that Dead Shot Dandy would fire a shot at you, behind your back, Mexican Monte, you lie," cried the Boy Bugler, his eyes flashing.

With a curse the scout sprung toward the boy, but quick as a flash two weapons covered him, one in the hands of Benito, the other held by Keno Kit.

"Hold, Mexican Monte, or I will kill you," cried Benito, while Keno Kit said:

"Pard, I hain't goin' ter see a man fight a boy 'thout chippin in, so let up."

"Keno Kit, you are on the road to have trouble with me."

"Put up your weapon, for I meant no harm to the boy," said Monte livid with rage.

"But I meant harm to the man, and it's war between us, Mexican Monte, whenever you like."

"Keno Kit, I thank you for your kind act," and Benito wheeled upon his heel and left the cabin.

All present, and there were half a dozen in the cabin, expected trouble to follow between the chief and his scout; but instead, Monte said quietly:

"Now, Keno Kit, I wish you to get nine others besides yourself, and be ready in fifteen minutes to start upon the trail."

"All right, pard," and Keno Kit left the cabin.

Soon after Monte and his scouts rode out upon the trail, and the camp settled down to repose.

But soon after the sentinel halted an approaching horseman, who was riding in haste for the fort.

"I am Dead Shot Dandy, sentinel, and I have important news for the colonel," was the reply.

Soon after he was admitted to the room of Colonel Du Barry, to whom he reported that he had been dogging the steps of three men, and following them to the timber beyond the post had there killed two of them, but the third had escaped.

"They were Marauders, sir, as you will see by these things which I took from their bodies," and he handed to Colonel Du Barry some papers and bags of buckskin, containing money, jewelry and a number of valuable little trinkets.

The colonel glanced at the papers and cried suddenly:

"Ha! these were taken from the father of Benito, Dead Shot."

"Call the boy, and at the same time send a party after the bodies of those two men."

Dead Shot instantly obeyed, and the Boy Bugler soon after came into the colonel's quarters.

"Benito, Dead Shot killed two men to-night, and found upon them these papers, and they bear the name of Dewhurst."

"They belonged to my father, sir," and the boy choked up with emotion.

"Did your parents and sister have any jewelry with them?"

"Yes, Colonel Du Barry."

"My father wore a watch and chain, and a seal-ring, and my mother had considerable jewelry, as did also my poor sister."

"Describe their jewelry, please."

The boy did so, and Colonel Du Barry said:

"Then all here belongs to you, for here is your father's watch, here is the ring, and these things were your mother's; but I see nothing among them such as you describe as belonging to your sister."

The boy took them with a gentle touch, as though they were most sacred as the relics of the dead and said:

"I thank you, Colonel Du Barry. These did indeed belong to my parents, but the absence of anything that was my poor sister's proves, as you have told me, that she must have escaped the massacre to be lost and devoured by wild beasts."

"A better fate, my boy, horrible as it seems, than to have been left in the power of the merciless Marauders."

"Give those papers and trinkets to the paymaster to keep for you, as you would be robbed of them in your quarters— Well, sergeant?" and Colonel Du Barry turned to the sergeant who had gone to bring the bodies of the two Marauders into camp.

"There are no bodies in the timber, sir."

"What?"

"We searched every foot of the timber, sir, and there is no dead body to be seen."

"This is astonishing."

"I will go myself with you, sergeant," and Dead Shot departed with the soldier.

But in half an hour he returned to make the same report, greatly to the amazement of Colonel Du Barry, for a search with torches and lanterns had revealed no dead body in the timber.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COIL TIGHTENING.

EARLY in the afternoon of the day following the night of the mysterious shot and the spiriting away from the timber of the dead bodies of the two Marauders, Monte and his party of scouts returned to the fort.

Instantly the chief sought an interview with the colonel, and finding Captain Cecil Lorne with him, asked for a private interview.

"Say what you have to say, Monte, before the captain."

Monte scowled, but said:

"I obeyed your orders, Colonel Du Barry, and made the circuit of the fort."

"With what result?"

"I found several different trails, freshly made, but none of sufficient size to give cause for alarm, as not one of them was made by over half a dozen men."

"Indians or whites?"

"Both, sir, as there were shod and unshod horses ridden."

"The rancho doubtless got alarmed by rumors, for he reported numerous bands of Indians skulking about."

"No, colonel, such is not the case, at least within the circuit which you bade me go."

"But, sir, I wish to report a curious circumstance."

"Well, Monte, what is it?"

"I was playing cards with a party in my cabin—"

"I believe you are as good a card-player as you are a scout," said the colonel with a smile.

"A scout's pay, sir, is so small that I add to mine by gambling," was the frank confession.

"Well, what was the curious circumstance?"

"I was fired upon, while seated with my back in the open door, and in a direct line with the light."

"Fired upon?"

"Yes, sir."

"By whom?"

"That is yet to be found out, sir, but I have my suspicions."

"See, the bullet grazed my cheek here, and this is the little piece of lead intended for my head."

Colonel Du Barry took the bullet, and Monte went on:

"It sunk into the adobe wall, and I cut it out."

"But where was the shot fired from?"

"The timber, sir, to the south of the camp."

"Ah! that was a long shot."

"True, sir, but it was fired from a long range rifle, and the splendid aim shows the one who sighted it was a dead shot."

"Then you suspect some one?"

"I do, Colonel Du Barry."

"Whom?"

"Dead Shot Dandy."

"Ha! do you mean it?"

"I mean that the bullet you hold fits his rifle alone, of all those in camp."

"This looks serious."

"It is serious to me, sir."

"But, Monte, what reason would he have of killing you?"

"I appeared against him upon his trial when he murdered Bronze Bill, and—"

"Hold Mexican Monte, you shall not assert before me that Duke Decatur murdered Bronze Bill."

"Say when he was accused of it," hotly said Cecil Lorne.

"As you please, Captain Lorne, when he was accused of murdering Bronze Bill, I appeared against him."

"Yet he saved your life only a few days ago."

"True, colonel, but I believe the shot was an accidental one."

"I saw him fire it, sir, and it was not accidental," said Cecil Lorne.

"Well, gentlemen, I stand in his shoes, as you know."

"Then why did he not let the Indian kill you, for then, after his gallant conduct and services, I would have made him chief again," remarked Colonel Du Barry.

"I have more to report, sir," said Monte, feeling that he was accusing a man before his friends.

"Well, sir."

"As we left last night on our scout, we went through the timber, for I wished to see if any one was encamped there."

"Finding no one, I halted and was lighting a cigar with a match, when a shot was fired from a distance directly at me, and it was so well aimed that it knocked the weed from between my teeth."

"At the flash of the rifle, which was fired from quite a distance away, half of my men cried aloud:

"Dead Shot!"

"Ha! they recognized him?"

"Yes, sir."

"This looks most serious, Lorne."

"It looks so, sir, but may be explained away."

"At what time was this, Monte?" asked the captain.

"About nine o'clock, sir."

"And at what time did Dead Shot come to you, colonel?" continued Captain Lorne.

"About ten, I believe, for I was just retiring; but did you give chase, Monte?"

"Yes, sir, and his horse ran away from us easily, and Dead Shot rides the only animal that I know of which can drop mine in that way."

"Monte, I admit this looks serious for Decatur, and I will tell you what he reported last night."

"He told me that after leaving Captain Lorne's party, he went on into the mountains until he struck another Indian camp."

"Then he reconnoitered until he found a way by which the village could be reached at night and attacked."

"Returning on his way to the fort, he saw three men, none of them mounted, or if so, he did not see where their horses were concealed."

"He dogged their steps, and, convinced that they were Marauder spies, ran in upon them, killing two, while the third escaped."

"Upon them he found papers and trinkets of considerable value belonging to Benito Dewhurst, my Boy Bugler, and I gave them up to him."

"Then I sent for the bodies to see if any of the command would recognize them, and they could not be found."

"The bodies?"

"Yes."

"What did Dead Shot Dandy do with them?"

"Some one spirited them away."

Monte shook his head doubtfully and said:

"Colonel, I know that you and Captain Lorne are the friends of Dead Shot; but I am confident you are deceived in him, and if you give him the rope, ere long he will hang himself."

"By Heaven! but I will try it."

"Let not a word of this be spread through the camp, Monte, and tell your men not to speak of the shot fired at you last night after you left the fort."

"Then I will have Dead Shot Dandy watched, and, if I can detect him in guilt he shall hang for it, I assure you."

"As he will deserve to do if guilty," said Captain Lorne, and Monte arose and departed from the colonel's quarters, convinced that before long Dead Shot Dandy would run his neck into the hangman's noose.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SCOUT'S FRIENDS.

DEAD SHOT DANDY sat alone in his quarters, upon the evening after Monte's return.

He had had orders to be ready to march at dawn, to the Indian country, to guide Captain Lorne and a large force to the Indian village he had found, and he was putting his weapons in order.

His pard in his camp quarters was Benito, but the youth was then up about head-quarters, where his duties kept him until late.

Suddenly in through the open door glided a familiar form, and quickly she closed it behind her.

She wore a heavy shawl, and her head was muffled up in a large Spanish veil.

At first glance, as he arose to his feet, Dead Shot thought it was Nita, the Mexican maid of Marie Du Barry; but as the veil was thrown back he discovered with surprise that it was none other than the colonel's daughter herself.

"Miss Du Barry, this is indeed an unexpected honor," he said, hardly knowing what to say.

"It is a duty, Mr. Decatur, not an honor, for I have come to place you upon your guard."

"I do not understand you, Miss Du Barry."

"I will at once explain."

"You have foes in this camp who are plotting against you."

"But, Mr. Decatur, though appearances are terribly against you, I will frankly tell you that I do not believe you are guilty."

"Of what am I now accused, Miss Du Barry?" asked the scout.

"I will tell you all."

"I overheard this afternoon, while reclining in the hammock on the piazza of my father's quarters, a story told by Monte to my father and Captain Lorne."

"It was to the effect that Monte was shot at last night, while playing cards in his cabin, and the bullet grazed his cheek, and buried itself in the adobe wall."

"Monte dug it out, and says that it fits your rifle only, among all at the fort."

"Yes, there is not another weapon like mine in the command," was the cool reply.

"And more, he says the shot was fired from the timber to the south of us, a distance which your rifle will carry."

"True, my rifle will kill where other weapons will not carry."

"Again, he told that he was lighting a cigar in the timber last night, after starting out upon a scout, and a bullet cut the weed from his lips, but that all saw by the flash who fired the shot."

"And who was it?"

"The scouts said that it was you."

"Indeed! they were mistaken, for I am no assassin," was the haughty reply.

"So I believe, Mr. Decatur; but under the circumstances, you must admit that appearances are against you, especially when you could not find the bodies of the two men you killed."

"I cannot understand that affair, Miss Du Barry, for I always shoot for the head, and both of those men had bullets in their skulls when I bent over them, and took the valuables and papers from them."

"Well, you know, Mr. Decatur, that I am your friend, and as my father told Monte he intended to have you constantly watched, I decided to commit the unmaidenly act of coming to your cabin and placing you on your guard."

"Miss Du Barry, I cannot tell you how I respect you for your bold act, and how deeply I thank you for your kindness, and your trust in me."

"Some day I hope to prove my appreciation of it," and the scout held forth his hand, which Marie grasped warmly, and then, wrapping her veil about her head and face once more she glided quickly out into the darkness.

Dead Shot stepped out also and saw that there was no one near to see her, and then re-entered his cabin and resumed his work of cleaning his weapons.

"Say, pard, is you in?" and the door opening admitted Keno Kit.

"Yes, Kit, be seated."

"No, pard Dead Shot, I hev only a leetle minute ter stay, fer I doesn't wish ter be seen talkin' to yer jist now."

"But I has come ter whisper to yer thet Monte, durn him, are playin' lively fer your scalp."

"Ah! he can have it, if he can take it."

"He don't intend ter flight squar' fer it, an' I only wishes yer hed hit him last night."

"What do you mean, Keno Kit?" sternly asked Dead Shot Dandy.

"I means thet I tuk yer part when ther shot come at him, when we was playin' keerds in ther cabin."

"But when yer let drive at him, as he were lightin' his cigar, then I seen yer myself."

"You saw me, Keno Kit?"

"Fact."

"No you did not."

"Pard, it were but a instant by ther flash o' ther rifle; but it did light yer up, horse an' all."

"And you mean to say that I fired an assassin's shot at Monte?"

"I seen it?"

"I tell you Keno Kit, that you are mistaken, and before this I have believed you my friend."

"I is yer friend, Dead Shot; but ef yer says yer didn't fire ther shot, then I doubts my optics, rather than your word, fer yer hain't been ther man since I hev knowed yer, ter lie, tho' I confess I lies like a auctioneer at times."

"Keno Kit, I tell you that though you may have thought you saw me, you are mistaken, for I have never pulled trigger on Mexican Monte."

"When I do, I shall kill him."

"I hope yer won't be very long in pulling, pard."

Dead Shot laughed lightly, and Keno Kit departed, happy in having placed the scout upon his guard against a foe whom he knew meant him evil.

He had been gone but a short while when Benito entered, and his face wore an anxious look.

"Well, little pard, what is it?" asked Dead Shot Dandy.

"I have bad news for you, Dead Shot," was the answer, as the youth sat down by his side.

"Indeed! bad news seems to be an epidemic just now," answered the scout with a smile.

"I don't wish to be thought mean, Dead Shot, but I listened to-day to what Monte told Colonel Du Barry."

"That I had shot at him twice."

"Well, he hinted at something he had told him earlier in the afternoon, about your shooting at him; but what I heard him say was that he had come back to tell the colonel something that had occurred to him."

"What was that, Benito?"

"I heard him say:

"Colonel, I have a theory to work on, which, taken in connection with the shots which I am convinced were fired at me by Dead Shot, look most suspicious."

"Well, did he divulge his theory?"

"He said that you had brought in papers and jewelry that had belonged to my parents, and told how you had gotten them from the bodies of two men whom you had killed, and whom you knew to be members of the Marauder band."

"Well, Benito?"

"He went on to say that, as the bodies could not be found, it looked as though no men had been killed."

"Ah!"

"And more, he said that as you had discovered me in the Smoky Timber and brought me to camp, he thought that you were secretly a member of the band of Marauders."

"Ha! said he so!" and the scout's face whitened.

"Yes."

"Go on, please."

"He said that you had doubtless been with the Marauders who had attacked our train and took as your booty the things you gave the colonel last night for me."

"Why should I give them up?"

"He thought that your conscience made you do so, and that the story of the killing of the two men was merely an excuse to give that you might account for their being in your possession."

"It certainly is a well told story, Benito."

"But what said the colonel to this?"

"That he could not doubt you until perfect proof of your guilt was given to him."

"I thank him for that."

"And Captain Lorne said the same, and more, he told Monte that he believed he was anxious to have you out of the way."

"And what says my friend Benito to these charges?"

"Why do you ask me, Mr. Decatur, for you know I look upon anything said against you as false."

"Bless you for those words, my boy."

"But now turn in, for we must make an early start in the morning," and soon after the cabin was in darkness, and the scout and the Boy Bugler were serenely sleeping in spite of the circumstantial evidence tightening about the neck of the Dead Shot Dandy.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LOST SCOUT.

At the appointed hour the command, over a hundred strong, pulled out of the fort upon the raid to the mountains.

Every trooper was picked, and so was every scout, for the service in hand, while the best animals at the fort had been selected for the work, with extras taken along for supplies and ammunition, and to supply the place of any horse that might break down.

At a quick trot Cecil Lorne led the way, Dead Shot Dandy riding upon one side of him and the Boy Bugler upon the other.

Then followed the troopers, a hundred in number, and Monte, with thirty scouts brought up the rear.

Coming in sight of the mountains, they struck into a trail running toward the river, as though going in that direction, so as to throw any Indian scout off the scent, should one be watching them from the hills.

But they halted before sunset, staked out their horses, and went into camp, apparently for the night.

But, as soon as darkness came on the fires were built up, and mounting quickly, they dashed away for the hills.

It was a ride of two hours to the foot-hills, and there Dandy Shot took the lead, the other scouts following in single file.

A couple of hours more and Dead Shot Dandy came to a halt, and reported that the Indian village was not a mile off, and that, while the horses had breathing time, he would go forward and reconnoiter.

"I will go, sir," said Monte, not wishing to lose the honor.

"No, Dead Shot shall go, for he it was who discovered the camp," said Captain Lorne quickly, and in a tone that admitted of no argument.

Then Dead Shot Dandy rode forward and Benito asked permission to accompany him, saying:

"I am so anxious to learn all I can about scouting, Captain Lorne."

"Go with him then, Benito, and as you are in such good hands, I need not say be careful."

A moment after Keno Kit glided up to Cecil Lorne's side and said in a whisper:

"Cap'n, Monte are a-going too."

Instantly Cecil Lorne sent a young lieutenant, acting as his aide, to order the chief of scouts to report to him.

Monte soon appeared, evidently in no pleas-

ant humor at being thwarted in his intention of accompanying Dead Shot and Benito.

As if not aware of his intention, Cecil Lorne, said:

"Monte, I wish you to take half of your men, and leave the other half for Dead Shot Dandy to command, and you attack on the right of the troopers, while he attacks upon the left."

"Yes, sir; but I think—"

"What you think, sir, has nothing to do with it."

"You have my orders, and I expect you to obey them."

Monte saluted and walked away, and in silence the command awaited the return of Dead Shot and Benito.

Soon the Boy Bugler appeared, but he was alone.

"Ah, Benito, where is Dead Shot?"

"I left him at the Indian village, sir, and he sent me back to guide you through the pass into the valley."

"Why did he not come?"

"He said that the valley was narrow, with a stream through its center, and the Indian tepees upon either side."

"Also that the pass above was narrow, and that he would make his way there, and when you dashed into the valley he would begin to fire with his repeating-rifle at that end, so as to make the Indians believe that they were attacked from both quarters."

"A good idea; but he takes big chances alone."

"He'll take care of himself, sir; but he told me to tell you that he supposed the village numbered fifteen hundred, fully four hundred being warriors."

"Is there no red-skin sentinel at the pass?"

"Not now, sir."

"You smile as though there was something else to tell."

"Well, sir, there were two, but I lariatd one and Dead Shot killed the other with his knife."

"Bravo for you, Benito; but come, we must be on the march, and you, Keno Kit, take command of the squad of scouts I intended Dead Shot should command."

Slowly the troopers marched forward, now under the guidance of the Boy Bugler, who certainly had begun well as a scout, and in a short while they came to the narrow gorge in which the valley where was the Indian village terminated.

Upon one side lay two dark forms, which Benito explained had been the Indian guards.

Passing through the gorge, the Indian village came in full view, with the tepees looking like grim specters in the shadowy light of dawn, for the mountain tops were already brightening under the approach of day.

Not a soul seemed stirring in the red-skin camp, though a dog was barking viciously in the upper end of the valley, as though his sleep had been disturbed.

Forming his men for the charge, when all was ready, Captain Lorne said in quick tones:

"Men, keep together, and use your revolvers."

"Be careful to harm no women and children."

"Benito, blow the charge!"

Instantly the bugle sent forth its stirring strains, and, with a cheer from the troopers and wild yells from the scouts, the cavalcade bore down upon the Indian village with a rush.

With wild cries the red-skins sprung from their couches, and seized their weapons in alarm.

But the avalanche of steeds, steel and fire was upon them, and scores fell before a blow could be struck to resist the attack.

Captain Lorne knew, however, that the village was much larger than he expected to find, and that he had a stubborn foe to deal with, so kept his men well together, for he saw that the Indians were rallying at the upper end of the valley, and might in turn become the assailants.

But, just then, from the upper pass came

rattling shots and flashes, and the Indians swayed from that direction in wild alarm.

"Dead Shot is at work," cried Benito, and then all realized the good service the scout was rendering, though single-handed, for the red-skins evidently thought that they were to have a force drive down upon them from that quarter also.

Again the bugle's wild notes were heard, ringing forth the charge, and once more the troopers swept on through the valley, driving the panic-stricken red-skins before them, and to the sides of the mountains for shelter.

For a while then the red havoc was continued, and then the fight was ended.

The sun had now risen above the hill-tops, and lighted up the sickening scene, for tepees were on fire, dead warriors and some squaws and papposes were lying thick about the village, while many a wounded brave was chanting forth his death-song.

Here and there too lay a dead and wounded trooper, with a man in buckskin, from Monte's band of scouts, and one young lieutenant was among the slain.

Captain Cecil had struck a telling blow against the red-skins, but his loss too was heavy.

"Where is Dead Shot?" asked Cecil Lorne, as the time went by and the scout failed to appear.

The question remained unanswered, and when noon came he had not been seen.

Then the trophies of the fight were gathered together, the dead men buried, the squaws and children were left for the fugitive warriors to return and care for, and loaded down with his wounded, booty and prisoners, the latter chiefs and prominent warriors, Cecil Lorne gave the order for the march back to the fort.

But it was with a sad heart that he and Benito left the scene, as they feared that some terrible fate had befallen Dead Shot Dandy.

CHAPTER XV.

A TRIO ON A TRAIL.

A GRAND reception greeted the return of the victorious soldiers, but the joy of their triumph was dampened by the news that Dead Shot Dandy was either killed or a prisoner in the hands of the revengeful red-skins, who would be only too glad to have a victim to satiate their hatred upon.

His noble conduct on the expedition again caused Colonel Du Barry to feel that he could not be the man that Monte represented him to be.

Benito, the Boy Bugler, was also spoken of in the highest terms, for he had become a hero, having distinguished himself in the fight.

The boy seemed almost crushed in spirit by the loss of his friend, but hoped that he would yet turn up.

He told Colonel Du Barry that he had ridden to the upper pass of the valley, and had there found the dead body of the braves, killed with a knife, who had evidently been the guards, and had been slain by Dead Shot Dandy in seeking his position from which to fire when the charge was made.

The day after the return of the command to Camp, Benito sought the colonel, and asked if he could be spared for several days to go upon a search for the missing scout. Keno Kit having signified his willingness to accompany him.

"And I will gladly join you, Benito, if the colonel will spare me for a few days," put in Cecil Lorne who was present.

"I will spare you both, for I think it would be safer to go with a squadron, Lorne," answered the colonel.

"No, Colonel Du Barry, for we could not move with a body of men as three of us can," said Captain Lorne.

"As you think best then."

"Keno Kit is one of the best Indian-fighters I ever knew, and I am, as you know, colonel, not a bad scout, while Benito here is

a prodigy as a prairie boy, so we will make a strong trio on a trail, if I say so myself."

"When do you wish to start, Benito?"

"Keno Kit said to-night."

"I am willing, so let us make all arrangements and let no one know where we are going."

Late that night three horsemen rode out of the stockade splendidly mounted and armed, and their object was to find some trace of the missing scout.

Straight to the mountains they went, Keno Kit proving to be a perfect guide and trailer, and the night after leaving the fort they camped in the valley where had been the Indian village.

Now all was desolation, for the ashes of the tepees, the graves of the dead and the picked bones of the animals slain in battle alone remained to greet the eye.

Seeking a sheltered nook the three hunters went into camp, and the night passed without disturbance.

But bright and early they were up and eating their breakfast, and then Keno Kit struck the trail of the retreating Indian, and followed it without the slightest difficulty.

All along the trail graves were here and there, where some wounded warriors had died on the march.

"They hev gone to ther upper heart of ther hills, an' thar we 'spied thar camp," said Keno Kit, whose every movement, in following the trail, was watched by the Boy Bugler, who was studying prairie signs with an earnestness that proved his intention to learn to become a thorough borderman.

At first the trail showed that the red-skins had moved rapidly, expecting pursuit by the troopers; but finding no chase was made, they went along slowly, and Keno Kit said had just three days before gone over the trail.

"Then it cannot be far to where they are encamped," said Captain Lorne.

"No, cap'n, ther main village o' ther reds hain't far away, and ef they hes got Dead Shot Dandy, we will find him thar."

"And you do not think they have killed him?" asked Benito.

"Not yit, Boy Pard; but they hain't goin' ter delay very long arter arrivin' in camp, you kin sw'ar."

"And you do not think he may have been wounded and died, and be in some of the graves we passed?"

"No, Beeneeter, them was all Injun graves, fer ef they hedn't been I'd hev dug inter one mighty quick."

Benito felt relieved at this, yet still feared that the scout might be slain, or tortured to death before they could rescue him.

How this was to be accomplished had not been decided upon, as Keno Kit had said:

"Ther way ter do, pards, is just ter find yer game an' then ter kill it."

That evening the three camped in a lonely canyon which the guide said was but a few miles from the Indian camp, as he could plainly see by the signs.

"We'll have ther critters heur an' then perced to go on hoof-back," he said.

They dared not build a fire to cook any supper, so ate what they had cold, and then, securing their horses, set forth upon foot.

That Keno Kit was right about the Indian village being near was soon evident, for the light of the fires soon became visible.

"It are thar big roost, whar they hes a willage ther year round."

"Ther bands starts out fer a run around arter scalps, plunder, an' game, an' gits back up heur once every year ter winter."

"But thar hevin' been two o' ther bands hit hard ther past week or so, I guesses others is toddlin' back heur ter head-quarters afore winter comes on," explained Keno Kit.

"Well, Keno Kit, there is the village in that valley, so what is to be done now?" asked Captain Lorne.

"I'll tell yer, cap'n, what are ter be did."

"What?"

"We'll strike one o' ther trails leadin' out o' ther willage, an' 'twon't be long afore we nab some red-skins goin' in or out."

"Ef thet don't go, then we kin look up ther sent'nels, an' bag one o' 'em."

"But what for?"

"You jist let me git my grip onto a red nigger o' an Injun, an' ef I don't make him squ'al out whether Dead Shot are in ther willage or not, yer kin gallop me back ter ther fort with yer spurs on."

"Ah! I see."

"Yas, an' I sees a innercent Injun comin' yonder."

"Here, boy pard, you lariat him as he goes by, fer you is some on throwin' a rope."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WARRIOR CAPTIVE.

BENITO, at the words of Keno Kit, offering him the honor of lassoing the red-skin, was delighted.

He was indeed an expert hand with the lariat, and grasped the coil handed him by the old scout with eager desire to do his best.

"He are alone, pards; but thar may be more o' 'em comin' abint him, so we hes ter go slow," whispered Keno Kit.

It was moonlight, and an Indian, mounted upon his pony, was plainly visible coming along the trail, and on his way to the village.

"I guesses he's a hunter, fer it looks like he hed plenty o' game on his pony," said Keno Kit, as the warrior drew nearer.

"Don't throw ontill he gits by us, pard, an' then let him hev ther coil."

"I'll stan' yonder, so as ter lariat ther pony."

"All right, Kit," said Benito, coolly, and he held his coiled lasso ready, having one end fastened to a tree.

Stepping some paces away, Keno Kit made his lariat fast to a tree also, and stood ready to catch the pony, when his rider was pulled from his back by the boy.

Nearer came the unsuspecting warrior, riding along as though he was tired out with the day's chase, for he sat loosely upon the back of his pony, which could now be seen to be well weighted down with game.

Abreast of the crouching boy the pony came, and then passed on, not even pricking up his ears or scenting danger.

Then, out into the air the lariat was hurled, and the noose fell about the shoulders of the amazed Indian, who was jerked from his pony's back to the ground with stunning force.

Before he could realize what had happened Cecil Lorne and Benito had seized him and dragged him into the bushes bordering the trail, where he was quickly gagged and bound.

In the meantime the pony had been cleverly captured by Keno Kit, who led him off of the trail and joined his comrades.

"Come, we must go ter safer regi'ns then these be, pards," said Keno Kit, and he raised the red-skin to the back of his pony once more and led the way to a point some distance away from the trail.

At last he halted in an open space, where the moonlight fell full upon them, and placed the warrior before him on the ground.

"Injun speak English?" he asked quietly.

The warrior shook his head.

"Waal, I kin talk your lingo, Reddy, in a way thet will make you sick," and then Keno Kit continued, speaking in the Indian tongue: "Red-skin great warrior."

The Indian seemed surprised to hear his own tongue spoken so well by white lips, but answered:

"Black Cloud great warrior."

"So I thought, and he don't wish to lose his scalp?"

Of course the red-skin desired to meet with no such loss, and Keno Kit continued speaking as before in the Indian tongue:

"If Black Cloud speaks with straight tongue, I will let him go free, when myself and pards are in safety."

"If he talks crooked, I will scalp him, so that he will be a squaw-brave, and then let him go to his people."

"What does pale-face brother want?" asked Black Cloud, more anxious to save his scalp-lock than his life.

"Will Black Cloud speak straight?"

The red-skin nodded assent.

"The Comanches under Wild Eye met a big loss in the valley some days ago."

A nod was the reply.

"Was Black Cloud there?"

A nod of assent showed that he was.

"Did Comanches take any pale-face prisoners?"

"No."

"Not one?"

"No."

"Does Black Cloud know pale-face chief Dead Shot?"

"Pale-face Blue Fire Eye?" asked the Indian, and remembering that Dead Shot Dandy was so called by the red-skins, Keno Kit replied:

"Yes, where is Blue Fire Eye?"

Black Cloud did not know, but had seen him in battle, and one pale-face had followed their retreat all day, and slain several of their warriors, but they could not capture him, he said.

"Dead Shot, for keeps!" cried Keno Kit, as he interpreted for the benefit of Cecil Lorne and Benito.

"So it seems, and if so, he is safe," answered the captain.

Then Keno Kit asked Black Cloud a number of other questions, which resulted in the discovery that when the Indians found that only one pale-face was pursuing them, a body of picked warriors, a dozen in number and splendidly mounted, had started upon his trail, and had followed it toward the south.

These warriors, he said, had not returned yet; or had not when he left the village half a dozen hours before.

"Well, the Black Cloud has spoken with straight tongue, and he shall not lose his scalp. When he shows us the trail taken by the braves in following Blue Fire Eye, he shall go," said Keno Kit.

The warrior demurred, but finding that it was his only chance, he consented, and they at once set off for the spot where they had left their horses.

Mounting, they continued their way until nearly dawn, when Black Cloud told them that they were about on the trail.

Then they camped, ate a good meal from the Indian's game, giving him his share also, and securing him beyond hope of escape, lay down to rest.

CHAPTER XVII.

A RUNNING FIGHT.

It was just dawn when Keno, with the power to awaken at any time he wished, threw off his blanket and called to his comrades.

Instantly they were upon their feet, and again the Indian warrior's game suffered from the very good appetites of his three white captors.

Feeling that he was to be kept faith with, the warrior also enjoyed his breakfast, and, confident that he was doing no harm in sending three men upon the trail of a dozen, he pointed out very readily the way which the pursuers of Dead Shot had gone, for that it was none other than Dead Shot none of the trio doubted.

Keno eyed the trail closely, and set out upon it, following it upon foot, while the others came behind.

He had not gone very far before they came to the summit of the foothills, and saw the rolling prairie spread out before them.

"Now, Black Cloud, you can go," said Keno Kit, releasing the warrior and telling him to lose no time in getting out of sight.

As the red-skin mounted his horse a free man, Benito saw him slightly start, and a change came over his face, and told his companions about it when the Indian had ridden off.

They watched him for an instant, and then Keno Kit said:

"Now, pards, we'll follow on this trail, for it leads across the prairie, and ther Injun told ther truth, fer does yer see thet thar be jist thirteen horses as hes gone along heur?"

His comrades did not see that fact, but took Keno Kit's word for it, who then said quickly, as he glanced out over the prairie:

"Thar, boy pard, thet is what made yer Injun look strange—he seen them reds a-comin'."

As Keno Kit spoke he pointed out over the prairie to where a party of mounted warriors were visible, coming toward the hills.

"Ha! it must be the party who pursued Dead Shot," cried Cecil Lorne.

"No, there are but ten in that party, sir," said Benito.

"I guesses thet Dead Shot hev got away with two of 'em, an' ther others tuck sick an' turned back," put in Keno Kit.

"Well, what are we to do, Kit?"

"Cap'n, we hes ter git out o' these hills as quick as we kin."

"Our animiles is fresh, so ter speak, an' theirs is played out, so we kin keep ahead of 'em, while if we remain heur thar'll be five hundred red devils arter us afore night."

"Then to the prairie we go."

"Yas, an' look thar!"

"Ef thet varmint hain't flanked us an' are a-ridin' fer life ter jine his kumrades, then I lies fur luck."

It was true, for Black Cloud had evidently just sighted the advancing party, and having gotten out of sight of the whites, had made all haste to get to the ten warriors approaching the hills.

"Come, pards, an' we'll dust," cried Keno Kit, and the trio rode down the hillside under cover of the timber, and, reaching the prairie, suddenly dashed out upon it in a sweeping gallop.

The Indians were now almost up to the foothills, and had halted, while their companion, who had just joined them, was telling them of the proximity of their foes, and pointing up to the spot where he had left them.

The whites had not gotten but a hundred yards from the hills before they were discovered however, and instantly, with wild yells, they started in pursuit.

The trio had fully a quarter of a mile good start, and felt that their horses were far superior animals to those ridden by the red-skins; but this hope was destined to a slight drawback, as they beheld their foes coming on at a swinging pace, and which showed that their ponies were not as worn out as they had believed and hoped that they were.

"Benito, you hes ther largest range shootin' iron, so yer hed better invite ther varmints ter stay abint a bit," said Keno Kit, as he saw that they would have to push their horses to keep ahead of the red-skins.

"Shall I knock over Black Cloud?" asked Benito quietly, unslinging his rifle.

"No, I guesses not, fer he did us a good tarn, ef 'twere ter save his seallip."

"Take thet fuss-an'-feathers a-leadin' ther gang."

Drawing his horse quickly to a halt, Benito sprung to the ground, threw his rifle across his saddle and a flash and report instantly followed.

"He! he! yer got him!"

"Bravo for you, Benito!"

The cries came from Keno Kit and Cecil Lorne, who had also reined up their horses when the Boy Bugler halted, and were delighted to see the Indian throw up his hands and fall to the ground.

Instantly his comrades gave vent to wild yells of rage, and urged their horses on the harder, while one of their number halted by the side of their fallen comrade.

That one was Black Cloud, whose horse was not as fleet as the others.

But the remaining nine came on with a rush, and began steadily to gain upon their foes,

who would not put their horses out at full speed unless driven by necessity to do so.

"Try 'em ag'in, Boy Boogler, but don't stop ter fire."

"Jist let 'em hev it as we rides along."

"All right, Kit," cried Benito, elated at his former success, and he threw his rifle to his shoulder and once more it sent forth its deadly load.

This time a mustang went down, throwing his rider over his head.

"Well done, Benito, for he is out of ther fight."

"Ha! there comes a volley from them," cried Captain Lorne, as shot after shot was sent after the whites.

"And you are hit, sir," said Benito, anxiously, as he saw Cecil Lorne slightly reel, and his left arm drop to his side.

"It is but a flesh wound, I think," coolly said the officer, grasping his wounded arm.

"This won't do, pards, fer they hes long-range irons too, which I didn't believe of 'em."

"We must show 'em our animiles kin drop 'em, fer thet wound hes tu be looked arter, cap'n, an' I are a half-way fool o' a doctor myself."

"Push 'em, pards, push ther critters."

In obedience to the call of Keno Kit the three horses were put to their mettle, and instantly began to drop the surprised red-skins, who believed that they had been urged to their best.

Chagrined at the deception they again fired a volley which, however, fell short; but Benito suddenly reined in his horse, sprung to the ground once more, and threw his rifle across his saddle while he called out:

"This is to avenge you, captain!"

"And you have done it, my brave boy," shouted Cecil Lorne.

"Durned ef yer hain't," cried Keno Kit, as a second Indian fell like a log from his horse.

Springing to his saddle again, Benito seized his bugle, which he never went without, and instantly sent forth stirring notes as he sped along, and which brought the Indians to a sudden halt, for unable to see over the rolling prairie beyond, they thought that there must be cavalry ahead, to which the youth was signaling.

"Yer hes made 'em scoot, boy pard, sure as blazes!" cried Keno Kit, as the red-skins turned about and rode back toward the hills.

"Now we'll see thet wound, cap'n," and a halt was at once called.

Examining it with the art of one who had learned from experience just what wounds were, Keno Kit said:

"Cap'n, thet are a trifle ser'us, so I'll jist tie it up, an' then we'll shove fer camp as quick as ther critters kin carry us."

This was good advice under the circumstances, and at a rapid pace the three horses were urged toward the fort.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PAYMASTER'S MISSION.

It was late in the night when the small party rode up to the sentinel at the fort, and Cecil Lorne was considerably used up.

His wound had bled freely and gave him great pain, while they had pushed on with little rest for themselves or horses.

While Keno Kit went with the captain to his quarters, Benito ran to call up Sergeant Dalton Otey, and the young officer was soon in bed and in skillful hands that extracted the bullet and dressed the wound in a manner that gave him great relief from suffering.

The colonel hearing some confusion, though not called, as Lorne had requested that he should not be, promptly arose and came to the bedside of his favorite officer, and Benito told him the story of their adventures, dwelling most modestly upon his own part in the affair.

Noticing this, Keno Kit put in:

"Col'nel, I tell yer thet Boy Boogler are a screamer, an' are goin' ter make a superfine

scout, guide, an' soger, fer he are thar when wanted, an' hes ther name o' Dead Shot.

"If ther scout don't tarn up I shell hev ther chapl'in baptize Benneeto as Leetle Dead Shot, fer he slings lead beautiful ter see."

"Not a bad name for my Boy Bugler, Keno Kit, and I know he is every inch a man, though he counts as a boy in size and years."

"But I am glad that Dead Shot is not dead, or a prisoner, for I suppose you think the story of the Indian warrior reliable?" said the colonel.

"Yes, col'nel, it are as reliable as a Injun kin talk; but I takes it fer a fact, as a brave don't do no foolin' round when he thinks his scallip is goin'."

"Ther comin' back o' ther Injun party he sed hed gone arter Dead Shot, helped ther warrior out in ther tale he told."

"You don't think that they could have overtaken the scout and killed him?"

"No, col'nel, fer ther Injun said twelve braves went, and ten comes back."

"Well?"

"Ef they hed overtook Dead Shot, thar w'u'd not hev been so many comed back, yer see, especially ef they hed kilt him."

"Then they w'u'd hev waved his scallip at us, which they did not do."

"I guesses, in startin' arter him, they bited off more'n they c'u'd chew."

The following morning Paymaster Edgar Leighton went to see Cecil Lorne, and after a short chat with him, said:

"Captain, I start to-morrow for San Antonio, on business for the fort, so if you wish me to make any purchases for you, I will gladly do so."

"Thank you, Leighton, there is one thing I do wish you would do for me."

"Certainly."

"You know that I have expected to go myself, but have been prevented by these Indian expeditions of late, and now Otey tells me I will have to keep quiet for a month, so I will ask you to do a commission of importance for me."

"With pleasure."

"You know that I told Bronze Bill, when he was dying, that I would take to his daughter the money he left?"

"Yes."

"Well, there is something over three thousand dollars, as you know, and I wish you to deliver it for me to her."

"His name was William Dale, and her name is Lulu, and you will find her at the convent there."

"She knew her father not as he was, but as a ranchero, so you are not to let her become aware to the contrary, poor girl."

"Tell her he was shot one night by a foe, and that is all she need know of his death, and, when you pay her the money take her receipt in full, if you please, and that will relieve me of all responsibility in the matter."

"I will do just as you wish, captain," answered Edgar Leighton, and then he added:

"How old is she?"

"I declare I have forgotten, if I was told by her father."

"Is she good-looking?"

"That I do not know; but she certainly is not if she resembles her father."

"Not by a long shot; but I only asked, thinking, if she was a young girl verging upon womanhood, and very beautiful, I might fall in love with her."

"I give my consent, Leighton," was the laughing reply of the captain.

"You had better write her a letter or let me do so for you, and you sign it, explaining all, for I hate to tell people about the death of their kindred, and that will break the ice for me."

"I will do so, Leighton," replied Cecil Lorne, and during the day the letter was written, the money given to the paymaster for Lulu Dale, and the next morning he left the fort in an ambulance, escorted by Keno Kit and two soldiers as an escort to San Antonio.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MASKED MARAUDERS.

THE paymaster and his escort went into camp at noon, for rest and the midday meal, and no idea of danger was entertained by any of them, until suddenly out of the chaparral dashed a party of horsemen, half a score in number.

All but one of them were armed with rifles, and he carried a revolver, with which he covered the heart of the paymaster, while he said in stern tones, and in perfect English:

"Senors, you are my prisoners!"

The horsemen were all dressed as Mexican cavaliers, their arms were of the best make and silver-mounted, their saddles were heavy with silver, and their faces were masked most thoroughly, the curtain of the mask going around under their broad sombreros so as to hide even their hair.

In fact, with their gloves on it would be impossible to tell whether they were whites, Indians or negroes.

"Ther Marauders o' ther Rio Grande!" cried Keno Kit, who took affairs very quietly.

"Yes, we are the Marauders of the Rio Grande," answered the leader.

"And is you Captain Alvarez?" asked Keno Kit.

"I am."

"Then ther jig is up fer us."

"Your lives are safe, if you surrender your booty quietly," was the reply.

"And if we do not, Sir Bandit?" asked Edgar Leighton.

"Then I shall have you shot down and leave your bodies for the coyotes, while I will take your booty anyhow," was the calm reply.

"Ah! under those circumstances, as we are wholly in your power, we can but surrender."

"It will be by far the safest plan, Lieutenant Leighton."

"What, you know me?"

"Yes, as paymaster at Fort Blank."

"Well, you have been content before to strike at defenseless trains and rancheros, Sir Marauder; but now that you have daringly halted a Government officer, you will find that you have made a mistake."

"In what way, sir?"

"You will be hunted down for your act."

The outlaw leader laughed lightly and said:

"Come, senor, we but lose time."

"You have with you some fifteen hundred dollars of Government bonds, and then a package to be delivered to the Senorita Lulu Dale, at the convent in San Antonio."

"That package foots up thirty-two hundred and twenty dollars."

"You seem well informed, Bandit?"

"It is necessary that I should be in the work I do, sir."

"And you intend to rob me of this money?"

"I do."

"You will not spare that of the poor girl, for it is her all?"

"I will not rob the girl, sir, but I will rob you of her money," was the strange reply.

"And my men, will you rob them?"

"No."

"You are generous," sneered the officer.

"But I will take a balance which you have with you, and given you by the officers and miners at the fort to make purchases for them."

"Ah! you know of that too?"

"Yes, it amounts to several hundred dollars, which I cannot afford to lose."

"Ah! but you shall rue this."

"I have not done yet, Lieutenant Leighton, for I recall that Matt Moore, the post sutler, gave you just one thousand dollars with which to pay some bills of his."

"Oh, Heaven! I am ruined, for all my savings just amount to what you take from me, and I shall certainly restore to all the sum I am robbed of which belongs to them," said Paymaster Leighton, in a disconsolate tone.

"You are certainly honorable, sir, but they cannot claim from you the amounts."

"Now, sir, kindly give me the several packages of money which I have named."

"Say, pard, you needs hangin' wuss nor a wolf," bluntly said Keno Kit.

The Marauder chief laughed lightly, but still held out his hand, and, making the best of a bad business Edgar Leighton promptly handed over the money.

"Thank you, senor, I will not forget your kindness."

"Farewell!"

As he spoke he bowed, and wheeling his horse quickly a limb struck his sombrero and knocked it, with his mask from his head.

"Dead Shot Dandy!"

The name broke forth from Lieutenant Leighton, Keno Kit and the soldiers, as the handsome, daring face of the scout was revealed.

Swooping down from his saddle, without dismounting, he picked up his sombrero and mask, and rode off, followed by Edgar Leighton's stinging words:

"Duke Decatur, you are a common thief after all, and well you deserve hanging for the crimes I now know you to be guilty of."

The Marauders dashed away in silence, and then the paymaster called to Keno Kit.

"Well, paymaster?"

"Would you have believed it?"

"I w'u'dn't, before ther Lord, pard, an' it eats into my heart to know it."

"Well, I wish you to return to the fort and make my report to colonel Du Barry, for I shall write him."

"And you, sir?"

"Will go on to San Antonio, for we will need no guide from here."

"I can readily raise the money to pay all that was taken, for I have an account of my own to cover the amounts, and I will give it up, though it is the earnings of ten years."

"You is squar' clean through, paym'ster."

"I am but just, Keno Kit, for no one shall lose a dollar through me."

"It were not your fault."

"I was intrusted with the money and I lost it; but to resist would have been madness."

"Now you return to the fort with my letter, and spare not your horse."

"No fear, pard."

"Then ask the colonel to send you back with half a dozen scouts and an escort of a sergeant and ten troopers, for I have no desire to be robbed on the way back."

"I guesses not, and we'll be thar."

"I'll await your coming in San Antonio, Keno Kit."

"Now I will write my report."

The paymaster then made out his report of the affair, and told who was indeed the noted Marauder Captain Alvarez.

With this Keno Kit started on his return, while Edgar Leighton and his soldiers continued on to San Antonio.

CHAPTER XX.

ILL-OMENED TIDINGS.

LIKE lightning from a cloudless sky fell the tidings upon all at the fort, when Keno Kit returned with the news of the Marauders' robbery, and who it was that was known as Captain Alvarez.

Often it had been said that Captain Alvarez was seldom with his Marauders, and this rumor was now revived, to show how cleverly Dead Shot Dandy had managed his work, living at the fort, and keeping his men posted upon all movements of parties from whom money and booty were to be obtained.

Monte was delighted that his suspicions had proven correct, and now but one person doubted but that Bronze Bill had died by Dead Shot Dandy's hand, and that he had been the one to fire upon the chief of scouts, who had stepped into his shoes.

I say one doubted still, and I must add that there were two doubters.

These were Benito, the Boy Bugler, and Marie Du Barry.

These two persisted in believing that there was some mistake, a case of mistaken identity,

and all arguments would not convince them of the guilt of Dead Shot Dandy, and even Colonel Du Barry became provoked at their faith in the scout, while Cecil Lorne went partially over to their side and said:

"It looks bad, but somehow I have a lingering hope that Dead Shot is all right."

Monte, at his own request, was sent with the escort to San Antonio, Keno Kit being left in charge of the scouts.

It was several days before the party returned, and they came in with sober faces and with the ambulance carrying two wounded men, while twice as many more had been left in graves on the trail side.

The paymaster's story was soon told.

They had dreaded no danger from Marauders or red-skins, with a force of twenty men, and yet at midnight their camp had been attacked by a score of daring Marauders, led by their chief; they had been driven from it in spite of a desperate resistance, the ambulance had been robbed, and then the bandits had retreated, carrying off their dead and wounded and leaving behind them death and suffering and rage at their losses.

"Did the same man lead the Marauders as before?" asked Colonel Du Barry.

"Yes, sir."

"It was, you think, Dead Shot Dandy?"

"I know it, sir, for in defiance he wore no mask."

"Why did not you kill him, Leighton?"

"I emptied my revolver squarely at his heart, but he seemed to bear a charmed life, and Monte was wounded in trying to drag him from his horse with a lariat which he had thrown over him."

"Brave Monte."

"Well, this is certainly ill-tidings to me, Leighton, for I loved that man," said the colonel, sadly.

"It was hard to believe, sir, but it is true, and I am ruined, for I lost all my own money, which I spent in place of what I had been robbed of."

"It is hard, Leighton, but you must not be alone the sufferer, for no one will hold you for their slight losses, and will pay back the sums you replaced with your money, while the Government and sutler Matt Moore must suffer, as both can afford to do."

"But let me tell you of a strange circumstance, colonel."

"Well."

"You are aware that I had the money Bronze Bill left for his daughter?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I told Dead Shot, as I now know the chief to be, to spare that, and his answer was a peculiar one."

"What was it?"

"That he would rob me of the girl's money, but not her."

"What did he mean, Leighton?"

"I will tell you, sir."

"When I reached San Antonio, I sought the convent, and asked for the girl, as soon as I had gotten the money from my deposit to give to her."

"She came into the room, and was really a beautiful maiden, with a face of rare fascination."

"Not like her father then?"

"Far from it, sir, for she is an angel."

"Her father wishes he was too about this time, I guess, Leighton," said the colonel, dryly.

"Doubtless, sir; but she is indeed a lovely creature."

"Dead gone, heart, head, and money," laughed the colonel.

The officer blushed, but said:

"I told her that I had been intrusted with a letter for her from Captain Cecil Lorne, which would give her bad news, and also, that I had for her a considerable sum of money, for I would not tell her of the robbery."

"It was noble of you, Leighton."

"She read the letter with her eyes full of tears, and then told me that she had already

been informed, the evening before, of her poor father's death, and had received the money which he had left her.

"I was dumfounded, Colonel Du Barry."

"And well you might be."

"But who told her, and who gave her the money?"

"That I asked her, and she said a tall, handsome man, with fine blue eyes and golden hair had called."

"He did not give his name, but told her that her father had been slain by the chief of the Rio Grande Marauders, and when dying had left that sum for her."

"Then he paid to her exactly the amount which I had for her."

"This is remarkable."

"Not so, when you know that it was the Dead Shot Dandy, as we called him, who did it."

"True, it was just like him; but what did you do, Leighton?"

"I told her the money had been left in my hands, but that some friend of her father had doubtless, not having seen me, determined to pay it, and I urged her acceptance of the amount."

"But she would not take it, saying that the letter stated only a certain sum, and consequently I kept my money."

"This is strange, indeed, but, Leighton, I intend to hunt this traitor scout down, and out of his booty you shall get back your losses."

"Thank you, colonel."

"I shall set Cecil Lorne with fifty men, and Monte with his scouts at the work, as soon as the captain is able to take the saddle."

"In the mean time, Monte can set his men secretly to work to find out all he can about the haunts of these Marauders, and they shall be wiped off of the Texas prairies forever."

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

ALTHOUGH Colonel Du Barry was most earnest in his endeavor to keep his word and hunt the Marauders of the Rio Grande off the face of earth, every attempt to do so was a signal failure, for their daring chief eluded all pursuit, defeated parties sent after him whenever he was brought to bay, and continued his depredations all the while with wonderful success.

At last he became so bold in his raids that extra troops and scouts were ordered to Fort Blank, and this forced the Marauders to seek safety in flight across the Rio Grande, where, upon Mexican territory, in the fastness of the wild mountains, they knew they would be safe from pursuit by American troops, and for those of Mexico they seemed little to care.

Untiring in all their raids after the Marauders, were Benito the Boy Bugler, and Keno Kit, and their adventures would fill a volume.

But strange as it may seem the Boy Bugler, in spite of all said against Dead Shot Dandy, would not believe in his guilt.

"I must see him myself, to believe him guilty," he would say.

And this faith in the innocence of the man who had befriended him, was shown also by Marie Du Barry, whose life Dead Shot had twice saved, for she too would not believe him guilty.

Their faith made Cecil Lorne and Keno Kit also a little shaky in believing Dead Shot the Marauder chief; but the scout would say:

"It's ketchin' afore hangin', an' ketchin' will show who he are."

But all efforts to capture the bold chief proved unavailing and, as Dead Shot never returned to the fort during the raids against the Marauders, all but Marie Du Barry and the Boy Bugler believed that he was indeed Captain Alvarez, the Bandit.

[See "Keno Kit, The Boy Bugler's Pard, or, Dead Shot Dandy's Double."]

THE END.

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